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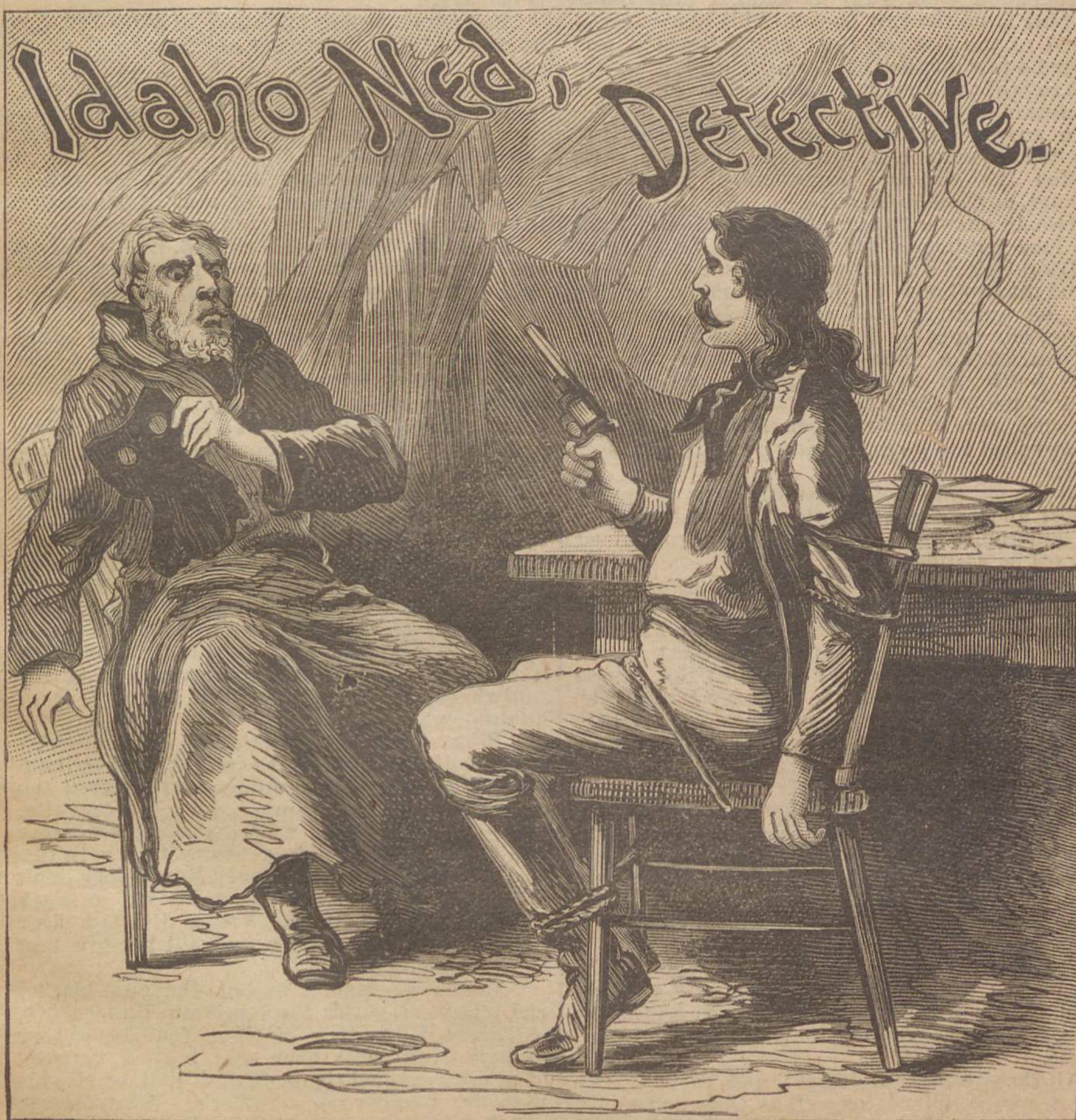
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THE MASK WAS TORN AWAY WITH A JERK, DISCLOSING THE FACE OF ICHABOD IMPREE.

Idaho Ned, Detective ;

OR,

THE MINERS OF TARPOT CITY.

BY ED. L. WHEELER,

AUTHOR OF "DEADWOOD DICK" NOVELS,
"ROSEBUD ROB" NOVELS, ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

EN ROUTE FOR TARPOT.

"ALL aboard fer Tarpot! This aire the last stop 'fore Tarpot City. Pervide yerselves wi' 'freshments, or else don't growl!"

This was the stentorian order of the weather-beaten Jehu, who, whip in hand, a pint bottle peeping from the vest pocket of his blouse, clambered to the box of the "hearse," which had halted a few minutes at Loop-Hole, just as the last rays of the June sun were kissing the rugged mountain-tops.

In answer to that shout, the six-in-hands of spirited coach-horses pricked up their ears, sniffed the air, and impatiently pawed the ground, anxious to be off.

Also, in answer to the shout, there issued from the lone habitation which comprised the "city of Loop-Hole," a number of persons, who clambered into and onto the stage, all bound for Tarpot, an ambitious and moderately prosperous young mining camp down the range.

Then, after a "horse-chestnut" from his private bottle, as an offset against malaria, old Nick Belmont, forty years in the "biz," cracked his whip, gave vent to a Comanche-like yell, and away rolled the stage, leaving behind a cloud of dust.

As the *personnel* of the passengers was mostly mixed, and yet characteristic of that wild region, we will glance them over as the stage rolls along toward its destination.

On top of the stage was Big Blobbs, a mountain celebrity, who had distinguished himself by killing seven red-skins, single-handed; Freckle-Faced Frank, who had started the first cemetery in Gander Gulch, and Six-Toed Sol, whose boast it was that he had personally "planted" more pilgrims than he was years old, and intended to clean out the town of Tarpot on arrival there.

Within the "hearse" sat five passengers.

There was a young lady, handsome of figure, who was deeply veiled and clad in mourning. She was accompanied by a smooth-faced, elderly gentleman, of between forty and fifty years, who, judging by the blandness of his countenance, could safely have been put down as having something to do with the Church.

The third party, who evidently was of the set of the first-mentioned twain, was a young man of four or five-and-twenty, with a pleasant face, handsome eyes, and curling hair and mustache.

All three were well dressed, and their traveling accompaniments, as well as their demeanor, indicated that they were fresh from the States.

Fourth among the interior passengers was one

of those peculiar characters of the West, best characterized as a "girl sport," because of the half-and-half dress, and her evident roaming inclinations.

She was of about the medium stature of women, and possessed a gracefully-molded figure. Her face was youthful, and decidedly pretty—of the saucy type of beauty it was, with a roguish expressed mouth, dancing dusky eyes, and a wealth of wavy brown hair that fell back over her shoulders in a disheveled mass.

Her costume consisted of patent-leather knee-boots, white cloth pants, with a long-skirted hunting-jacket of buckskin belted at the waist, a white flannel embroidered shirt, with collar thrown open at the throat, while a broad-brim slouch prairie hat sat well back upon her head.

She wore a small arsenal of weapons in her belt, and was altogether a striking appearing personage.

The fifth passenger appeared to know her, for he frequently addressed her as "Fan," and again as "Foggy."

He was a gigantic individual, fully six feet six in his top-boots, and huge of trunk and limb—a man who looked as if he might be gifted with prodigious strength.

In face he was ugly and hairy, his visage positively reminding one of that of a monster baboon.

His coarse attire was ragged, mud-splashed and greasy, and the battered plug hat he wore had probably been an heirloom, handed down by several generations.

The inclination he had to be noisy and talkative, proved that he had not forgotten the Jehu's warning to provide himself with refreshments.

The topic of his remarks was confined to one particular individual, whom he familiarly dubbed Yreka Jim.

"I tell yer, Foggy, thar ain't nothin' slower stingy mean 'bout thet aire Yreka Jim, ef he do haunt ther trail, an' et'll be a long time afore the Vigilantes rope his windpipe. He's jes' as pert an' chipper as they assay, hyer-about, an' durn me ef I ain't sometimes o' ther fragrant belief thet he aire a speerit!"

Miss Foghorn Fan took time to finish lighting a cigarette; then laughed heartily, as if the bullwhacker's words afforded her a deal of amusement.

"Pshaw! you git crankier an' crankier ev'ry day, Bullfrog!" she answered, taking advantage of a gleam of sunshine that entered the coach, to look the young man, just opposite, square in the face. "D'ye s'pose a real *bona fide* spirit could fetch a hearse to a halt, like Yreka Jim does? Pooh, no! Ner history don't allow as how a ghost war ever known to speak ther English language. Yreka Jim is a clear case o' flesh an' bones, an' I'll bet my best shutin'-iron on it."

"Mebbe so—mebbe so, but I'm gum-blasted ef I b'leeve et, sure's I'm Benjamin Bull Tarpot, o' Tarpot City—ther original founder o' ther gamest camp w'ot ever sold bottled hornets. Thet aire cock o' the walk ain't real, or else his hide aire tougher nor a buffler's. Why, Foggy, didn't a dozen o' us sock ther plumbago at him, t'other night, fer kill, an' it never fazed him?"

He jest stood an' laffed like a tickled hoss. When we hed got thru, he waltzed up to the hearse, an' throwed us in every consarned bullet we hed fired—*fact!*"

"Oh! come, now, give us a rest! You're the biggest liar on the range, Tarpot. If you don't hush, you'll skeer our hearse companions."

Old Tarpot chuckled.

"Skeer 'em!" he chuckled. "Jes' wait till Jamesy waltzes up to ther hearse, an' inwites 'em ter pony up. Reckon thar'll be a kick on the ticket, then. Heigh-ho!"

"I'm Bullfrog Ben o' Tarpot City;
Ef ye'll hark to me, I'll sing ye a ditty,
About a knight both game an' bold,
Who straddles a hoss, an' gathers gold—
A cool complacent sort of a cuss,
W'ot makes ye 'come down' wi'out any fuss;
Purty's a peach, an' fly as a lark,
Allus on deck 'bout the time thet it's dark;
Rides up to the hearses, an' raps at the door,
An' tells ye the same story, o'er an' o'er,
It's gold thet he wants, an' jew'ry, an' tickers,
An' ef ye object, ye'r' chronics an' kickers—
Ye'r' mean, an' stingy an' hev no compassion
Fer ther widders an' orphints of this great nation;
Then out pops his shooter, wi' orful precision,
An' at yer resist nce he laffs wi' derision:
He tells ye ter rise, an' make yer donation.
Ter ther widders an' orphin's wi'out hesitation;
An' ef ye refuse ter obey his command,
His iron sends ye kitin' to that far-away lard
Whar life is but vapor transparent and thin,
While below reigns in triumph thet cool Yreka Jim!"

"Bravo! bravo!" Foghorn Fan laughingly cried. "Why, Bullfrog, you must be the poet Laura-ate!"

"Poetry, did ye whisper—poetry? Why, Foggy, gal, I am ther fu'st man that ever writ a word o' varsification, I am. Shakespeare an' Bobby Burns an' sev'ril hundred other fellers l'arned their trades o' me!"

"Without a doubt. I see yer genius is supernatural. But, I say; hev you a eucher deck? If ye have, we'll play jest ter pass away time."

"Nary a deck, Foggy. Got so hungry afore I got out o' Tarpot thet I actooally eated the hull pack."

Foghorn Fan turned to the elder gentleman, who was pale and anxious, because of the terrific speed at which the stage bowled along, and careened from side to side.

"I say, old gent, ye hain't got a deck about yer duds, hev ye?" she demanded, with a twinkle in her eye.

"No ma'am, I have not!" was the frigid answer. "Cards are the tools of the devil, and handled only by his agents."

"Phew! Ye don't tell me! You don't play, then?"

"Certainly, unseemly young woman, I do not!"

Fan stared, and turned to old Tarpot, as if for a solution of the enigma.

"D'ye hear, Bullfrog? He don't flip! My, oh! what's this world ever comin' to?"

"Dear knows!" the bullwhacker gasped, in amazement. "The times 'pear ter be gittin' more an' more degenerate. It'll be so, after awhile, thet a feller darsen't carry a six-shooter!"

"If weapons and whisky were abolished from the face of the earth, there would be peace and

prosperity!" the bland-faced man declared. "You people are far behind the enlightened age."

"Durn me, ef we aire, eh, Foghorn?" and Tarpot looked belligerent. "I reckons we aire better'n ary tenderfut, ef we *do* take our whisky straight. We kin lick our weight in wildcats, an' we don't allow no one ter walk on us, nuther. Why, dern yer picter, pardner, I've chewed up an' spit out bigger fellers ner you, when terbaccer war skeerce!"

"Yes, and as fer bein' enlightened, Cap, we've fergot things, years ago, w'ot yeow tenderfeet aire jest beginnin' ter l'arn."

Whether this fact was agreeable to the sedate man or not, was not apparent, for he remained silent.

The conversation had evidently proven a source of amusement to the younger man, about whose mouth was an expression of good-humor.

When the first spat had had time to die out, he glanced at his watch, and addressed Foghorn Fan, the reckless prettiness of whose face had evidently made an impression on him.

"Excuse me, miss, but might I inquire if you live in the mining town called Tarpot?" he asked.

"I do, sir!" the girl replied—"leastwise, I hang out there, most o' the time."

"Oh! you bet we do!" chimed in old Bullfrog. "I am ther galoot w'ot founded ther city, an' put her on 'er taps!"

"Then, could you inform me," the young man went on, without noticing the bullwhacker's interruption, "if a man resides there, by the name of Ichabod Impree?"

"There does, sir. He owns the only quartz mine and crusher in the camp."

"Thank you. We had learned that he resided somewhere along this range, but had not been able to get his exact location."

"Relation o' yours?" Fan asked, giving the trio another speculative scrutiny, and forming the conclusion that the elder gent was the father of the younger couple.

"Yes. My father, Doctor Wygant, and Mr. Impree are cousins!"

"Ah! Then I presume you intend to stop off at Tarpot?"

"We do."

"Glorious an' prehistoric name—'Tarpot,'" grunted the giant. "Ef ye purpose ter stop thar, young feller, ye may as well know, frum the start, thet I'm the big man o' the camp, an' nary galoot durst say his life is his own when I'm about. I puts down my leetle gallon o' red-eye per diem, an' am a *bad* man!"

"You look it!" young Wygant declared, with a laugh.

"Yas, an' I feel it!" Ben asserted. "I am a walkin' funeral, I am, an' I allers buries ev'ry galoot what I kills!"

Further conversation did not take place, just then, for the coach whirled down into a narrow ravine, deep and dark, where the walls of rock reared perpendicularly toward the heavens.

The stars were out, but only faintly served to relieve the gathering gloom of night.

As the stage tore furiously down through this miniature canyon, the driver every now and

then gave vent to a wild, resonant yell that sounded weird in the extreme.

The silence within the coach seemed wrought of awe on the part of the Easterners.

As for Foghorn Fan and Bullfrog Ben, they exchanged significant glances, as it became perceptible that the speed of the stage was increasing.

Ned Wygant noticed the fact, and bending forward touched the girl sport on the arm.

"What does it mean?" he asked.

"Which?"

"The speed!"

"Oh! nothin'. The driver has got a bet that he carries the hearse past to-night!"

"Past? Past what?"

Fan laughed.

"Why, you're green!" she declared. "This trail has to divvy up to a chap called Yreka Jim. He's a road-agent, an' you kin bet ef ye carry much gold he'll gather it in, without so much as thankin' ye for it!"

And just then the "hearse" came to a halt, with so much abruptness as to nearly pitch the Eastern passengers forward upon their faces.

Simultaneously came to the hearing of all, the ringing cry of—

"Halt!"

CHAPTER II.

YREKA JIM AT HOME.

SUCH a cry as that which reached the passengers within the stage was not, to say the best, particularly pleasant to the finer senses; and it caused the trio of Easterners to look startled and nervous.

"What is it?" gasped the elder Wygant.

"Oh! mercy!" articulated the veiled passenger.

"Something has broken down!" from Ned Wygant, the young man.

"You bet there has!" Foghorn Fan declared, with a peculiar chuckle. "Yreka Jim is jest ther feller w'ot has broke it, too."

"The road-agent?"

"You bet!"

The stage-door was flung open an instant later and a figure darkened the aperture.

Not the figure of an ordinary man was it, but a ghostly-looking person, clad from head to foot in a flowing robe of white, with a tall peaked white hat upon his head; hair worn long and as white as the driven snow; face equally as white and deathly as the garments that draped the figure. Hardly a feature of it, there was, but what seemed perfectly at repose; it was the face of a young man, say not over six or seven-and-twenty, with a graceful mustache and imperial, equally as white as the hair, and eyes dark and piercing as an eagle's.

Certainly a stranger apparition never was encountered.

"Good-evening, ladies and gentlemen!" a voice cried. "I trust I find you well this evening, and prepared to shell out a penny for charitable purposes, such as establishin' a home for red-headed widders an' orphans, salivated galoots, and the memory o' bygone toughs. Yreka Jim, at yer service, and I wish to impress upon your minds the fact, that my time is limited to-night, and I trust you will be ac-

cordingly expeditious. Foghorn Fan, I will thank you for that little wad of legal tenders you carry in your watch-pocket. Also, Benjamin Tarpot, you will confer an everlasting favor by surrendering the small boodle you transport in the lining of your hat!"

Tarpot and the girl sport looked their astonishment.

"See hyer!" expostulated the bullwhacker, "this hain't no fair, durned ef it is. How d'ye know I use my head-gear fer a nachional bank, Mister Galoot?"

"It matters not; I know whereof I speak, *always*, and you will save yourself trouble if you hand over the storage of the aforesaid crab-cage without delay. Be lively, all of you, for I have no time for parley! When I have no other pressing engagements, I really don't mind tarrying for a chat with you, but to-night it's out of the question."

And as if to enforce the fact, the gent of the trail shoved a cocked six shooter into the view of those within the stage.

"Here's my boodle!" Foghorn Fan cried, "but you can go your last ace that it's bad luck to whoever robs *me*!"

"Bad luck is an unknown quantity!" Yreka Jim declared. "Never believed in it. Come! come! be quicker in there. Pan out your pewter before I blaze away! I don't want to leave any dead men 'round hyer to-night, because my private cemetery is nigh about full. Thank you, Tarpot—great head! Thanks, Fair Foghorn, your substantial kindness shall ne'er be forgotten. Now, then, you other passengers on the interior, be more rapid with your donations, or I shall be in duty bound to spatter some o' yer brains against the windows. I have four medals fer dead shooting, and I allus keep my app'intments. You, Aaron Wygant, fork over your pocketbook. It is altogether too plethoric, for a man of your slight physical stature!"

The elder Easterner uttered a cry of astonishment as he heard his name uttered.

"Who are you, sir, that dares to demand my money?" he cried, fiercely. "Who are you that familiarly uses a name unknown in these parts?"

"Who?" Yreka Jim echoed. "Well, my dear Wygant, that does not concern you. You are entirely too inquisitive for an exemplary Christian, while I have too many personal compunctions to inform you who I was, ere life left my mortal clay, some years ago, at Yreka Gulch, and my spirit returned to the United States to gather gold. But come! you overtax my patience. Will you be more expeditious, or shall I clean out the coach? It's money or your life—so take your choice!"

"This is robbery! This is an insult and an outrage!" Aaron Wygant expostulated.

"Of course it is!" Yreka Jim agreed; "but, allee samee, it aine a combined spiritual an' livin' reality. Ah! worlds of thanks! I shall ne'er forget your kindness, for 'pon my soul 'tis a fat purse, and the widders an' orphans will shed bucketfuls of tears of gratitude. Let me see. I dare say you have a purse, with a few ducats in it, Miss Madeline. Please to pan out; and you, too, Mr. Edward Wygant—then I will

excuse you for this time, and you can pursue the route of your inclinations, heralding to the world the tidings that you liberally contributed to Yreka Jim's charitable fund for the support of the widders and orphans of the order o' played out pards!"

Terrified beyond expression, through having read of the brutallity of many Western road-agents, the Wygants dared not refuse to give up their valuables for fear of incurring personal violence; while as for Foghorn Fan and Bullfrog Ben, they had been too long in the auriferous regions not to know that it was always more conducive to good health not to parley with a gent of the trail who carried six deaths within the grasp of his right hand.

Therefore, Yreka Jim, the ghostly Apollo of the Tarpot trail, received what he asked for without an attempt being made at resistance, then slamming shut the door, he bade Jehu to git up and git," and himself faded from view as though he were in truth the spiritual individual he claimed to be.

Needless to say, Belmont made haste to put his six-in-hand in motion, and the "hearse" rolled away toward Tarpot City.

CHAPTER III.

THE GATHERING OF A STORM.

CONSIDERING that Tarpot City was a mountain-locked town, miles from the nearest railway and telegraphic, as well as commercial centers of the Far West, it was, in many respects, a wonderful camp.

Deep down in a mountain gulch or pocket, where the sun only shone a few hours in the middle of the day, access was obtainable only by the perilous dug-way stage trail, or may be a bear-path. It was the abode of a motley horde of human beings of many kinds and characters, who had assembled there to delve for gold.

Gold! gold! gold!

That was their one all-absorbing hobby—the ruling desire of their being. They worked for it with pick, pan and powder; they gambled for it; they fought for it, stole it, and even murdered for it.

Next to gold, the greatest scramble was for whisky, while provender came in for third place.

Outside of its own immediate precincts, the fame of Tarpot City was not extensive, for, although there was plenty of mineral for the mining, it was no "boom" in any particular sense.

There were from two to three hundred inhabitants, and they of the "fly" and heterogenous type peculiar to nearly every mining-camp.

The abodes were as various in design and material, as were the characteristics of the citizens, and the one main street, which contained all the business the camp boasted of, was ever a scene of excitement and turmoil.

Among the places of resort were the post-office, which occupied the same building as the only grocery and general supply store; the Quartz House, the main saloon, hostelry and gaming-house; and the street itself, which was ever the scene of some sort of a "circus," or disturbance.

The "Quartz" as it was familiarly dubbed,

was a famous hang-out for the rougher element, as well as for the traveling public, and though comparatively a young building, it had seen many a hard time, a fact that was evidenced by blood-stains upon its floors, and its bullet-pierced doors, window-sashes and furniture.

Tarpot City, in fact, proudly claimed that she could point to a bigger "casualty" list than any other town of her size west of Denver.

The mining interests of the camp were chiefly controlled by one individual, and his name Ichabod Impree.

He was a fine-looking man of middle age, or a trifle past, who had come to Tarpot with but a meager capital, and had been fortunate to such an extent that, little by little, he had gained control of all the immediately valuable mining territory, and was, by large odds, the largest producer of the camp, such other claims as existed being of comparatively no account.

Those of the denizens of the deep-down camp who worked at all were employed by Impree, who, until within a recent period had been regarded as a "square man" to deal with, and the wealthiest in the mountains.

Then, suddenly as the gathering of a cloud upon a summer's sky, a spirit of dissatisfaction had sprung up—increasing little by little, until public sentiment seemed strongly against the mine-owner.

To what this was due was not apparent, although those who pretended to know assumed that Impree had not served them right, without vouchsafing any further explanation.

Impree had paid good wages, and promptly, and associated with his employes the same as though he was one of them—until recently.

Then he had made a change.

When he first came to Tarpot his family only consisted of a young daughter, who was very pretty and had since grown to be an even prettier young lady of sweet sixteen, who was the idol of nearly every "galoot" in the camp.

That Impree should be content with his charming idyl, every one stood ready to declare; but they reck'd wrongly.

A couple of months before our story, the capitalist had returned from a flying trip East, accompanied by a fashionably-dressed woman, whom he had announced as his bride.

She was at once tabooed as haughty, supercilious and "stuck up," and a quiet vote passed through the miners' ranks that she wasn't a welcome addition to Tarpot's populace.

Idyl Impree at once announced her dislike for the new mother-in-law, and left her father's home for good, independently refusing his support, and earning her own livelihood by starting a rifle-range at the Quartz, where she received liberal patronage.

This did not serve to increase public favor toward the new Mrs. Impree, and as, when on the street or out for a morning ride, she gave not the slightest notice to any one, the general dislike for her also seemed to turn upon Impree, who, said the miners, "had no sort o' biz ter bring sech a proud petticoater to Tarpot's howl-in' city."

Mrs. Impree was a woman of perhaps thirty—a queenly sort of beauty, who was plainly not

in her place outside of a grand home and fashionable surroundings.

Whether with her dainty ways she had worked a spell upon her hitherto genial husband, could not be said for a certainty. One thing was sure: his manner greatly changed toward his employes; he was seldom seen with a smile upon his face, and no longer appeared to care to associate with the miners, as formerly; when forced to speak with them, he did so surlily and briefly, and had, for little or no offense, discharged several from his service.

All this, perhaps, was what caused the origin and growth of the spirit of dissatisfaction which existed at the date of our romance.

It had been imminent for several days that trouble was brewing, and the fact became better illustrated at the close of the day upon which Yreka Jim had stopped the stage as previously related.

When the six o'clock whistle of the great ore-mill pealed forth its announcement that the day's work was done, a crowd of miners and roughs began to gather around the office of the Impree Mining and Milling Co.—although, in fact, Ichabod Impree was the only part of the "company" that existed.

The looks of the men were not such as might inspire the idea that they were about to tender Ichabod Impree a complimentary speech, or a serenade; on the contrary, each visage wore a dark, dissatisfied expression, and it was very easy to comprehend that some importance attached to the gathering of the crowd about the office, where, at such an hour, Mr. Impree and his dwarfed clerk, McCarg were usually engaged in closing the day's business.

Then, too, the ringleader of the party, who was also gang-boss of the quartz mine, and named Jim Cephas, was considerably under the influence of liquor, and, evidently, just in the mood for a disturbance.

This fact became more fully apparent, when he strode up to the office door, and gave it several heavy kicks, yelling as he did so:

"Come out hyer, Ichabod Impree! Ye're wanted!"

CHAPTER IV.

WHEREIN LYNCH LAW PREVAILS.

THE kicks upon the door brought Mr. Impree to the office window, when, for the first, apparently, he became aware of the state of affairs outside.

He quickly left the window, and appeared in the doorway, hat in hand.

He was an intelligent-looking, well-preserved man, well dressed, and, at a glance, one likely to create a favorable impression, almost anywhere.

"Well, gents, what is the matter?" he demanded. "Who kicked upon the door, and what appears to be the difficulty?"

"I kicked yer door, an' ef I takes er notion, I'll kick it ag'in!" Cephas declared, boldly. "It war a premonishun thet we war hyer to see yer!"

"You need not have taken so much pains to emphasize the fact, sir," Impree declared, with a slight frown at his foreman's bluntness. "If

you are here to see me I suppose you are prepared to make plain the nature of your errand."

"You bet I aire!" Cephas acquiesced; "I'm ther spokesman o' this parcel o' galoots, an' ther boys all votes ther same ticket thet I do, you bet. Eb, fellers?"

There was a murmur of assent.

Mr. Impree scanned their visages, and failed to find one that wore a pleasant expression.

"Ye heer ther verdict?" Cephas interrogated. "Ther boys allers drinks ther same brand o' bug-juice I do—the amber-tinted sweat o' Satan's breath. An' now, yer wanten know ther why, wherefore an' whichsomever o' this hyer caucus, eh?"

"I do."

"Waal, ye see, I come down ter git me bloomin' walkin'-papers, an' fetched me pards along, ter witness ther transaction!"

"I don't understand you, sir!"

"Oh! yas ye do. Ye can't pull no film over my lamps—oh! no!"

"But, I insist I am in the dark, sir, as to what you are driving at. What do you mean?"

"Jest what I said. My name is Jim Cephas, I chaw railroad iron when I git mad, an' I'm heer ter take me discharge!"

"But, I still do not understand. Who has mentioned such a thing as discharging you? Not I, I am sure."

"But, ye hev!"

"You are in the wrong. You are the last man I should think of discharging."

"Can't help thet. I war told I would get me walkin'-papers, to-night, by you, an' I'm arter 'em. You an' yer wife aire one, an' I calcyate what she sez cums from yer lips!"

"Then you are wrong. Did Mrs. Impree apprise you that you would be discharged, sir?"

"She did."

"For what reason? She certainly must have a cause!"

"Waal, ye see, she come a-struttin' about the mouth o' the shaft, wi' her head kerried high's a giraffe's an' lukin' like she was a pile better than ther country itself, when I told her ter be keerful or she might walk off inter the boel. She fired up like a settin'-hen, an' sed as how she allowed she knew how ter take keer o' herself wi'out any o' my assistance. Thet set my narves ter buckin' ag'in' one another, an' I jest told her as how she needn't try ter skate on her ear; then she danced off like a branded burro, an' sed she'd hev me discharged, an' we boys aire heer arter the dockyments!"

There seemed no room left for doubt but what the last words of the gang-boss were meant to convey a threat, and Mr. Impree realized the fact, without any parley.

"Well! well!" he said, his cheeks flushed a trifle, "I am sorry anything like this has happened, boys. I am also surprised that you should pay any attention to so trivial a matter."

"Oh! ye call it a trivial matter, do ye?"

"Of course. You should know that I manage my own affairs, and I don't allow any one to do it for me. What my wife may have said really is not of the least importance!"

"But ye see it is!" Jim Cephas argued. "We aire all citizens o' this camp, boss, an' we reckon

we're as gud as they grow, hyerabouts. Ef we ain't it is funny!"

"No one has made any distinction that I am aware of, sir!"

"But, we know better. Ther fac' o' the matter aire, ye hedn't no business ter git married, an' turn yer purty gal out on the world. Thet war enough ter set us ag'in' you, alone. Then, when we see'd ther sort o' woman ye fetched among us, I allowed we didn't like it, real much, nohow. We see'd she war a 'ristocratic, stuck-up hen, an' we 'lowed we wouldn't let her play it grand over us, ner we won't, you bet! Then, too, sence you've spliced ter her, ye calculate yer old associations ain't gud enuff. Ye reckon ye'r' a peg higher 'an w'ot ye was when ye uster ter slip up ter ther bar, an' whoop et up fer 'em as sarved ye. The cussed petticoater hes been raisin' ructions, ginerally; an', 'twixt you 'n I an' ther boys, Ichabod, thar's got ter be a change. Either *you've* got ter give the new Mrs. Impree the grand bounce or your bizness days in Tarpot's geelorious city aire arrived at a finis!"

Impree heard; he could not well help hearing, when Cephas spoke fiercely and fast. So the mine-owner now knew what was the actual object of the gathering of the miners.

"But, boys! boys! this is all entirely unexpected and inconsistent. Your claims that I held myself aloof from you through any proud feeling or influence on the part of my wife is untrue. Family cares, of course, have mainly absorbed the spare moments I formerly spent among you. You have the same places in my hearty esteem that has ever been yours since my coming to Tarpot, and I trust you will act with your usual good sense and let this foolish matter drop!"

"Let 'er drap, hey?" Cephas gritted. "Waal, I reckon not! Let ye hev a reg'lar Johnny Bull time o' it, hey, wi' yer Mrs. Stuck-up fer queen? Oh, no! that won't work in no sort o' harness. We never 'lowed a Chinaman in Tarpot, an' we ain't goin' ter hev no Mrs. Queen Impree, you kin bet! She ain't of our sort. She's p'izen ter us, same as water is ter a Taos cowboy. She has got ter go! D'ye hear?—she has got ter take up her abode in some different metropolis than our bloomin' burg o' Tarpot. Hain't them ther sentiments, pards?—don't I spout ther solid fac's by ther shovelful?"

"Ye do—ye do!" responded the crowd. "We don't want no satin-finished ladies in Tarpot, wi' their noses forty degrees ter the squar' inch."

"O' course not! Idyl aire ther style o' stock we votes fer, an' we allus elects our canderdate, by a large majority. But ther new-fangled Mrs. Impree aire in ther wrong pew, an' must air her fineness in other lattytoads. Them's fac's sworn to an' registered."

And the nods of approval from the crowd proved that Cephas's philosophy was to their liking.

Mr. Impree now saw that it became him to exhibit more firmness than he had done, or an insurrection was a certainty.

Hard customers were the majority of the crowd who looked upon Cephas as a leader, and, once thoroughly aroused, they were capable of almost any mischief.

"See here! I will hear no more of this sort of threatening talk!" Mr. Impree cried, sternly. "I am not supposed to care whether my choice of a wife is agreeable to others or not as long as I am suited. I hire you men to work for me, and expect you to mind your own business, not mine. If you do not choose to do that, you know your only other alternative. As for one or a dozen of you saying that my wife shall *not* reside in Tarpot—why, you are consummate asses."

"Oh! we aire, hey?" Cephas hissed.

"Of course you are! This town is a free town, and no one or a hundred men can run it while I have an interest here."

"Ye don't say! S'posin' you're put beyond power o' hevin' anything to say—what then?"

"You act and talk without good sense, sir. For once and for good, I command you to disperse, and let me hear no more of this nonsense, or you can consider yourselves discharged from my employ."

"We kin, hey?"

"You can, certainly. I will employ no one of a mutinous or belligerent disposition."

"An' ye won't give yer new Mrs. Impree the G. B.?"

"Certainly not!"

"Then, ye kin jest bet yer dough is mud!" Cephas declared, savagely. "We don't allow as ye'r' ther boss o' Tarpot, anyhow, an' ef ye won't do the fair thing by us citizens, yer fate be on yer own head. Stand and surrender, or we'll riddle ye wi' bullets!"

Cocked weapons were there in the grasp of every man, and they now ranged on a level with Ichabod Impree's breast.

For him to try to escape meant death, as he saw by the unanimous expression that they were ready to shoot at an instant's notice from Cephas, their leader.

But, on the other hand, what would be the result if he surrendered?

He had no time for deliberation. Cephas came a step closer, snarlingly:

"Come, boss—*will* ye surrender or won't ye?" he demanded, savagely.

"What do you propose to do?" the capitalist demanded in return. "To what insults am I to be subjected if I submit to this mob-law power?"

"Oh! you'll be properly keerd for, you bet! We ain't no half-way galoots, ef our back is humped. Ain't thet so, boys?"

The miners merely nodded assent.

Mr. Impree looked the crowd over for an instant longer, then folded his arms across his breast calmly:

"I am here, gentlemen of Tarpot!" he said, in a ringing voice. "Although I have never done you aught but a good turn, if you have any just grievances against me I am at your disposal!"

There was a stinging expression of rebuke in his words that caused even Jim Cephas to hesitate as if ashamed of himself.

His bull-dog brutality of nature, however, soon asserted itself, and he uttered a hoarse yell, as if angry at himself for his temporary weakness.

"Hurrah! Seize him, boys!" he roared. "He's our mutton!"

The miners did not need a second invitation. A dozen of them rushed forward and laid hold of the mine-owner, and in less time than it takes to tell it, his hands were securely tied behind his back.

He was then led away toward the Quartz House, in front of whose broad veranda there grew a large cottonwood tree with huge outspreading branches.

By the time the crowd had reached it, Jim Cephas had possessed himself of a noosed lariat and hurled it so that the noose settled and tightened about Ichabod Impree's throat.

The mine-owner grew pale with anxiety and alarm, while the crowd looked more grim and savage than before.

"Now, boss!" Cephas cried, as Impree was halted beneath a convenient limb, "I reckon ye comprehend what's in ther perspective fer you, don't ye?"

I realize that you are a bloodthirsty set of ruffians!" Mr. Impree cried, coldly.

"No, we ain't nothen o' the sort!" Cephas declared. "We hain't got nothin' ag'in' you, no more'n we ever had, 'cept we've made up our minds that your wife, Clarice Impree, can't live hyer in Tarpot. She's a snake—she's p'izen to the very air, an' like the Chinese, she must go. You say she sha'n't, an' we say she shall. That's where we disagree!"

"Well?"

"Well, we don't want'er do you no harm but bizness is bizness, ye know, every time. Tarpot ain't no small shakes ov a town, but it ain't big enuff fer to hold us toilers of the pick an' pan, an' that aire critter ye imported from the East. We hain't got no horticultural halls fer sech a flower ter flourish in, no more we have, an' aside that, she's a rank weed w'ot's usurpin' the rights o' our pretty little mountain pink—yer own darter, Idyl!"

"It is *not* true. My daughter is a hot-headed and unreasonable child and left my roof of her own accord."

"On course she did! an' right she war in doin' it, you bet! She couldn't grow alongside a big sunflower, w'ot absorbed all o' yer affeckshun, as well as yer collateral, too, an' she was wise in quittin' ye. We pards o' Tarpot ain't graduates o' Christianity, I allow, but, durn my boots ef we don't stand solid ter a man, fer Miss Idyl, an' a man w'ot allows she's not a queen might as well order his coffin-plate engraved. Ye'r an ornery mean man to deal with, when a woman gits ye under her thumb, Ick. Impree, an' we aire ashamed o' ye fer yer darter's sake. So we hev made up our mind, thet ef ye refuse ter bounce ther fine lady up at yer shebang, an' restore Idyl to her rights, ther best thing we kin do fer the moral precepts o' the risin' generation o' Tarpot is ter give ye a h'iste."

"Your lengthy parley is out of place!" the mine-owner replied. "As I told you before, one or a dozen of you cannot run my business. I can die, but I cannot be forced to do contrary to what are my convictions of right. Hang me if you dare. The curse of heaven will descend upon you if you do!"

"Then yer won't bounce yer new wife frum Tarpot City?"

"I will *not*! I would be committing an unpardonable sin to think of putting away from me the wife I honorably wedded. You should be ashamed of yourselves to propose such a thing!"

"Waal, I guess not. Shame ceases to be a vartue in a case o' this kind. Boys, throw the shoe-string over the limb, an' lay hold, ready fer the toot o' my bugle. Now, Ick. Impree, yer ain't sech a fool as ter hang, aire ye, when thar ain't no use o' it? All you've got ter do is—say ther word thet you'll send yer wife to some other part o' this hemisphere an' we'll call itsquare."

Not a word did Ichabod Impree utter in reply. His face was sternly set, and his eyes glowed with a light of firm resolution.

Inasmuch as he had always been regarded as a man of strong personal peculiarities, his unyielding nature caused Cephas to utter a snarl of rage.

"Ye see, boys!" he cried. "The durned galoot aire mulish, an' would rather choke than give in. So be it! Ichabod Impree, ye'r goin' on a long trip, but ye can chew on the plug o' consolation that the pards o' Tarpot will see that Idyl gits her rights. Ready, boys—no skim-milk, now—one!—two!—three!"

Simultaneously with the word "three," the men laid back on the rope, and Ichabod Impree was drawn into mid-air.

For an instant only, however.

There was the sudden ping of a rifle, the whiz of a bullet; the lariat broke above the victim's head, and he dropped to the ground, insensible.

At the same moment a horseman cantered leisurely up.

CHAPTER V.

IDAHO NED, THE SPORT.

THE rifle-shot which had cut the lariat, evidently had been fired by the horseman, for he carried a handsome rifle in his right hand as he cantered leisurely up to the spot.

He was of good form, a trifle above the average height, and seemingly of great muscular strength and activity.

In face he was handsome. His features were full and clearly chiseled, and a trifle sun-tanned; his eyes were dark, magnetic and piercing; his mouth firm, but rather pleasant of expression. He sported a graceful brown mustache and imperial, and his hair, worn long and heavy, was of the same color. He was attired in citizen's garments, except for a pair of top-boots upon his feet, and a jaunty sombrero upon his head. His white flannel shirt was open at the throat; he wore no belt and possessed no visible weapons, except the rifle he carried in his right hand.

His horse was a spirited animal, with a fiery eye and clean limbs—a prairie thoroughbred.

There was an expression of cool unconcern upon the stranger's face, as he rode up to where Ichabod Impree lay, white and insensible, upon the ground.

"Howdy, gents!" he saluted familiarly. "Am

in time to be in at the death? If so, please pass around yer pie and cake!"

Jim Cephas uttered a furious malediction, while the crowd scowled darkly.

"Ye'r' jest a leetle too flip, me Mary Ann! What d'ye mean by shutin' down our prisoner?"

"What! did I drap him? Why, bless your bones, my man, I aimed ter see if I couldn't plug a hole thru his liver. Didn't hit him at all, eh? Well, I'll be blowed! Verily, the days of my shootitiveness are on the decline!"

"You'll cussed soon find out they are, ef ye come monkeyin' around *this* burg!" Cephas warned. "We aire bad men w'ot hangs up our stockin' hyerabouts, an' we kills ev'ry meddler what comes around."

"You do? Well, that ain't so bad. I ain't much pure unmitigated affection fer tramps myself. But, I say, I reckon the old gent yonder has croaked, eh? Looks as ef he couldn't hev been a werry stiff-necked galoot. An' that reminds me that this is about the time o' day when I wet my bugle. If you gents' inclinations are in any way arid, come along and drink wi' yer cousin from Idaho."

The miners exchanged glances, and as of one accord, looked to Cephas for a decision.

As for the bully, he eyed the sport a moment, at a loss whether to refuse the invitation or not.

"Dunno but yer p'izen aire as good as any one's, stranger, but I opine thet we allers wants to know who we drink with," he finally growled.

"Why, of course! Should I turn up my toes in Tarpot's magic city, it is my special request that you erect a marble *fac-simile* of Cleopatra's needle over my grave, and emblazon upon it, in fire-gilt letters, 'Idaho Ned, the Man Who Never Took a Bluff.'"

"Reckon you think you're bigger and better'n common folks!"

Cephas was in prime condition for a quarrel with whomsoever he could draw on.

"You bet I do!" the sport replied, good-naturedly. "Any galoot what ain't got any better opinion of himself than that he's common, ain't no good. I'm fer salivatin' him, you bet! I calculate I'm every inch as good as any pilgrim that ever wore cowhides, and have got the sand to back it. Any galoot as is on the square, an' hain't never waded more'n knee-deep in blood, is as good as I am, and is welcome to share 'sweat' wi' me at the Quartz House bar. So all in favor o' 'boomin' Bacchus, in honor o' Idaho Ned's arrival, will make manifest by coughing out their approval."

There was a general grunt of acceptance—general except Jim Cephas. He remained silent, and looked sullen and ugly.

"What! Won't you join us, pard?" the man from Idaho demanded, bending forward in his saddle. "Are we to be deprived o' the exquisite pleasure o' hearin' the bottle hornet gallop down yer inclined plane, me festive Cephas?"

"How d'ye know *my* name?" the bully demanded, his teeth going together with a savage click.

"How does an astronomer read the stars, and know the names of all the planets?" was the

smiling answer. "Cephas are you, tho' I'm blamed if I can tell you how I came to know the fact. Cephas are you, a mar with blood in his eye, and it has done me proud to ask you to irrigate your thorax along with me. Will you do it or not?"

"Ef I want whisky, I'll buy it!" the bully replied, with a savage emphasis. "I allow I don't keer to drink with you!"

"Indeed! you're as unruly as a Mexican burro. Do I understand you to say that you *won't* drink with me?"

"You bet! I *won't* drink with you."

"But, I say you *will*. Gents, just slide demurely into the Quartz, put yer shirt-fronts to the bar, and drink to the health of Idaho Ned! I will undertake to *make* Jim Cephas drink with me!"

As he spoke, the sport slipped from the saddle, and waving his hand to the crowd to follow, ascended the steps to the veranda of the Quartz House.

The crowd followed.

So did Jim Cephas, close in the tracks of the man from Idaho.

Into the bar-room, the sport led the way, and up to the bar, without looking behind him; but, by the complacent look of satisfaction on his face, it was evident that he was aware that Cephas was in his rear.

A string of glasses were set forth, and the bottle passed to Idaho, who poured out a swallow, and placed the bottle back upon the bar.

It was instantly seized by Jim Cephas, who had crowded up, alongside the sport, and he poured out a brimming glass, and to the utter astonishment of the crowd, and without waiting for any one, tossed it off at a gulp.

A cry of astonishment went up, and the miners stared at the man from Idaho, with considerable doubt and suspicion.

"Why, hello!" Idaho Ned cried, suddenly. "I thought you weren't going to drink with me? You see, gents," to the crowd, "that our friend Cephas has really more good sense than he lets on. He couldn't stand the pressure—he had to come to time. This is a free bar, boys, so help yourselves. And look you out, Jimmy me boy, and see that you get your share."

Seeing that Cephas was likely to get many seas over, before he backed away from the bar, Idaho Ned turned away, and directly left the Quartz House.

On reaching the veranda, he found that Ichabod Impree had been removed from beneath Judge Lynch's tree, to his office, up the street.

"Oh! he'll be all right in an hour or two," a miner volunteered to inform the sport. "He's a plucky cuss, is thet same Ichabod Impree, an' I allow no one in ther camp ever give him credit fer hev'in' so much grit."

And, thereupon, he proceeded to explain the "leetle defickelty," which had been the prime cause of the mine-owner's mid-air suspension, to which Idaho Ned listened, with manifest interest.

CHAPTER VI.

THE IDAHOAN IN TROUBLE.

THE stage that Yreka Jim had stopped, rolled down into Tarpot City, about ten o'clock that

night, and unloaded its passengers in front of the Quartz House, 'neath the light of the late rising moon.

Idaho Ned stood on the steps of the hotel, and curiously eyed the quintette of passengers.

Whether he was expecting any one in particular or not was not to be detected by the stolidity of expression on his face.

He regarded the Wygants narrowly, the same as he did Foghorn Fan and old Tarpot.

None of them paid any attention to him, however, but entered the hotel to make arrangements for their accommodations for the night.

A strange glitter appeared for a moment in the Idahoan's eye, as they passed beyond the range of his vision.

"They are here!" he muttered. "I wonder what it signifies?"

That remained to be learned.

He knew it, and that only time could develop the cause of the Wygants' coming to Tarpot.

Down the rugged main street a dim ray of light shone from the crack 'neath the door of Ichabod Impree's office.

No one was on the street in the vicinity of the office; therefore, it was apparent that all interest in the speculator's welfare had suddenly abated.

"I wonder whether the rope did him any serious injury!" the sport muttered. "Egad! It is to be hoped not."

He walked down the street, past the office, and then turned and retraced his steps.

Everything about the office was quiet; there was not even the sound of voices on the inside.

"Perhaps he has been removed to his residence!" he mused. "I judge the large house down yonder is where he hangs out. If he has been taken there—"

He did not finish the sentence, but entered the saloon part of the Quartz House, which, together with the gaming-room and Idyl Impree's rifle range, formed a distinct portion of the hostelry.

The miners were still ranged along the bar, two thick, drinking long and deep "bummers" to the health of The Man Who Never Took a Bluff.

Jim Cephas had imbibed just enough to make him hilariously good-natured, and was singing, dancing and cutting up all sorts of didoes.

The change that had come over him in the last few hours was certainly remarkable.

The barkeeper, a surly-looking individual, spied Idaho Ned immediately on his entrance and bawled out:

"Looke hyar, ye long-haired chap; I wanter see you!"

"Well, sir, what is it?" the sport asked as he stepped up to the bar.

"I guess ye know!" was the blunt reply.

"Ye ordered up free bar, didn't ye?"

"If my memory serves me right, capt'in, I did that same!" the sport replied.

"'Course ye did! Ain't it about time ye show'd whar the profit is comin' in?"

"Oh! you're afraid I ain't responsible, hey?"

"Why, bless you—how much is the tariff?"

"A hundred and twelve dollars!"

"Phew! the boys are light drinkers. Here's

five hundred, an' when Idaho Ned runs fer mayor of Tarpot, we'll hev another spill. Drink up the change gents. Money is as free as good nature wi' me!"

And throwing down a note of the denomination named, he walked on toward the shooting-gallery, which occupied one side of the long room.

The range was fenced off by a rope railing, and about thirty yards in length.

At the lower end were two bell targets; at the end nearest the bar was a rude counter, across which lay the rifles, which in turn were presided over by a young woman—or, more properly, a girl of about seventeen years.

She was neatly but plainly attired in a dark dress, which showed off her *petite* but graceful figure to advantage.

A bunch of wild flowers were arranged at her throat, and another in her luxuriant wealth of hair, which was as fine as silk, becomingly banded, and of a dark brown color.

A prettier face Idaho Ned was sure he had never encountered; a gloriously girlish face, happy of feature chiseling, health-tinted, and piquantly lighted by a pair of dancing blue eyes, that had the essence of fun and mischief in them.

One had but to study her face to read her generous and loving nature, and the Idahoan paused to drink in the pretty picture before he approached close to the counter.

There were several bystanders, who were trying their hand at target practice, and some of the shots were so wide of the bull's-eye, that Idyl joined with the others in laughing at the poor marksmanship.

"Why, I can beat that shot, Mr. Jones," she laughed, on one man failing to hit even the target. "I am afraid you wouldn't make a very great soldier."

"Oh! you never mind. I've years to learn in, and I don't know where I can get better criticism than at your hands," Jones gallantly replied.

"Try your luck, sir!" Idyl Impree said, addressing Idaho Ned. "Three shots for a quarter, and a cigar for every time you ring the bell."

"Indeed!" Ned said, stepping up. "I suppose you guarantee the cigar to be imported Henry Clays?"

"Oh! no sir," she replied with innocent earnestness.

"You see, sir, I could not make any profit by giving away high-priced cigars. The miners say, however, that these do very well, and will keep gnats away of a warm night."

Idaho smiled.

Her speech was artless, her manner candid.

She was evidently unconscious that the recommend of her cigars was savory of a spice of facetiousness.

"Well, if you give a cigar every time the bell is rung, I should think you would not make much either."

"Oh, but you see, the bell is not rung, on an average, more than about once in twenty shots."

"So? Well, here is one dollar and fifty cents. That entitles me to eighteen shots, does it not?"

"Yes, sir."

"Correct! I will try and ring the bell once out of eighteen times with a rifle."

He was handed a repeating-rifle, and raising it to his shoulder he fired, without scarcely taking aim.

Ping! went the bell.

Again and again did the rifle speak, and each time the ring of the bell responded.

When one rifle was empty he seized another, and finished his score without a miss.

During the performance the bystanders had increased largely in numbers, and the scoring of the eighteenth successful shot elicited a shout of applause.

"D'ye see him—d'ye size him? He's on the shoot!"

"He's a corker!"

"You bet!"

"Wouldn't like ter hev him blaze at me!"

Such and kindred remarks were to be heard on either side, showing that, while there was nothing extraordinary in the run of shots, the spectators were of the opinion that the sport could do more if necessity required.

"Why, I had a wonderful run of luck, didn't I?" Idaho observed pleasantly, as he handed the rifle back to the young gallery-tender. "If you had such customers as me right along, you'd need a cigar manufactory at hand."

"Indeed I would, sir. Here are your cigars."

"Pshaw! I do not want them, lady. Keep them in reserve until the man that looks like me comes along."

And turning, he was about to saunter on to the gaming-table when he found himself confronted by Ambrose, the bartender, who looked savage enough to eat some one, and held a bank-bill between his fingers.

"Say, hold on—looker heer, me friend!" he cried, roughly. "I've got a little bone to pick with you."

"Have you?" Idaho returned, calmly. "Well, what's the matter now?"

He saw a crowd of scowling, bearded faces behind the whisky-dispenser, and knew something had gone wrong.

"Matter!" Ambrose bellowed, with an oath.

"Well, I should snicker ef there ain't enough the matter. Yer may be a purty gud-lookin' galoot, I allow, an' as fly as they make 'em, but et won't work—no, sir-ee, bob-tail hoss!"

"What won't work?"

"Oh! ye needn't play up innercent. Mebbe I don't look as intellergent as sum hull families, but yer bet Bill Ambrose knows his biz, every time. Mighty liberal wi' yer cash, wasn't ye—'cash jes' as free as gud nature,' hey? But, when ye come any sech purty waltz movement over this hyer snoozer, he'll hev ter be old, blind an' walk on stilts!"

"If you will have the kindness to elucidate more clearly, we can perhaps comprehend you!" the sport said. "Otherwise, step aside, and allow me to pass!"

"Let you pass? Waal, I reckon not. Ther soil o' Tarpot Gulch aire peculiarly adapted ter the plantin' o' posies like you. Oh! you're a pink, you are—a reg'lar hyacinth, too, wi' a tuberosa throw'd in. But, allee samee, ye can't work the racket on Bill Ambrose. This hyer five hundred

dollar Williamette ye tried ter pass on me, aire counterfeit!"

"Counterfeit!" Idaho echoed, his face changing in expression.

"Yas, counterfeit! Tarpot ain't ther biggest city in the kentry; we hev neither railroads, nor telegraph, but, now an' then, I allow, we hev a man who kin tell beans from potatoes, right pert. This bill is a counterfeit!"

"If so, sir, it is the first I was aware of the fact," Idaho Ned replied, still composed. "I received it as good money, and of course passed it as the same, not having taken the pains even to examine it. Will you permit me to look at it?"

"Waal, I guess not!" and Ambrose thrust it into his pocket, with a malignant chuckle. "We'll just keep that fer evidence ag'in' ye. This matter o' slingin' around counterfeit money ain't no light offense. You're arrested an' will hev ter answer!"

"Who said I was arrested?" Idaho Ned cried, a dangerous glitter entering his dark eyes.

"I said so, an' I've got the backin' fer all I say, you bet!"

"What's all this about a five hundred dollar bogus bill?" demanded a voice, and Aaron Wygant pushed his way through the crowd. "I can perhaps throw some light on this matter!"

Then, as he saw the man from Idaho, he stopped short, and uttered an ejaculation of surprise.

"It's 'bout a gud deal!" Ambrose retorted, hoarsely. "This hyer purty galoot tried ter pass the bill on me, but I war sharp enough to discover it, and not let him escape!"

"Let me see the bill!" Wygant cried. "Cover the fellow, and shoot him, if he makes a move!"

This was a needless order: a dozen revolvers already covered the sport, grasped by men who thought no more of taking a human life than swallowing a glass of whisky.

"Here's the bill!" and Ambrose produced it. "Any greenhorn can tell it's bogus."

"The same! the same!" Aaron Wygant cried. "Gentlemen, I had this identical bill in my possession not over six hours ago. I first got possession of it in a business transaction in which I got bit to this amount. I was too honest to pass the counterfeit, but always carried it among my other money. Between five and six hours ago the stage, *en route* for this place, was attacked, or rather stopped, by a road-agent, and I, with others, was forced to give up what cash I had in my possession. This bill was among it!"

A cry of astonishment rent the air.

"This man here looks exactly like the individual who stopped the stage, except that the robber's face, hair and beard were snowy white."

"Yas, an' may gelorious Tarpot City never be proud o' its namesake!" cried Bullfrog Ben, swaggering up, "ef this galoot heer hain't ther same w'ot stopped ther stage an' skinned us of our hard earnings—Yreka Jim, the Gold Gatherer, wi' his paint washed off!"

"The same, without a doubt!" Aaron Wygant added. "This counterfeit note is clear enough proof!"

And then there arose an angry, vengeful murmur, and the prospects for the cool gent

from Idaho looked rather dubious, if one might be pardoned for remembering that the citizens of Tarpot had no particular love for road-agents!"

CHAPTER VII.

IN THE RING.

"YAS, ye'r Yreka Jim, an' ye'r jest ther last rose o' summer w'ot we want ter see!" Bill Ambrose declared. "Thar's a notis stickin' up ag'in' the Quartz House offerin' two hundred dollars fer yer capture, an' we've got yer at last. Fine game you've been playin', ain't it? Thort ye c'ud rob stages an' fling yerself around generally, eh? But ye got beautifully left."

"Gentlemen, allow me to inform you, whether it does any good or not, that you have made a singular, and at once, a ludicrous mistake. I am not Yreka Jim, but Idaho Ned, and I can prove it!"

"Bah! pooh! nonsense!" snorted Ambrose. "Ye'r a sucker!"

"I'll show you how much of a sucker I am. I insist that I am not Yreka Jim, the road-agent, and I will not submit to arrest as such!"

"Oh! ye won't, eh? Then you'll git salivated, that's all!"

"If you are not Yreka Jim, sir, how came you in possession of my counterfeit note?" Aaron Wygant demanded, sternly.

"That I decline to say. The note was received by me for honest money, and not knowing it to be bogus, I passed it. As for Yreka Jim, I am not that individual. I have not seen him lately and do not even know him to be alive. There you have the truth of the matter, all in a nutshell!"

"To let you tell it—yes. Perhaps the citizens of Tarpot won't take kindly to believing your simple word. The evidence is complete, against you, and if you know when you are well off you will own up, without delay!"

"Indeed! You seem to have fallen into an office of authority all at once, Aaron Wygant!" the sport retorted, his eyes glittering. "How did you get *your* papers, so soon?"

The Easterner looked uneasy, and regarded the sport sharply.

"How do *you* know my name, sir?" he growled, evidently not relishing the sport's knowledge.

Idaho Ned laughed.

"That's easy enough!" he replied. "A man who carries a placard affixed to the seat of his trousers, advertising his name and business, is to be known anywhere!"

With a snarl of rage, the old gent tried to reach and look behind him, in quest of the offensive card; while comprehending Ned's waggishness, the crowd gave a yell of laughter.

They were not taken sufficiently off guard, however, as Ned had hoped, to give him anything like a show to escape.

Realizing the sell that had been perpetrated upon him, Aaron Wygant's face flamed with indignation.

"You think you're smart, don't you?" he growled. "Some o' the smartness will get taken out of you, however. Where's the balance of money you robbed me of?"

"An' mine, too!" bellowed Tarpot. "Ther

widders an' orphints hain't got nary a claim on me, an' I want my shekels back, or by the great limpin' Socrates, I'll raise ructions wi' yer camp."

"Yes, and I believe I also have a little claim to put in," Ned Wygant added, stepping forward.

"Do you recognize this chap as Yreka Jim the road-agent?" Ambrose demanded.

"I should say that the resemblance is singularly striking, except that Yreka Jim had a ghostly face, and white hair and beard!" Ned replied.

"That's easy accounted for. A little flour will make all thet whiteness. 'Tain't no use o' parleyin' ther matter, boys. This galoot is Yreka Jim, the road-agent, an' he's ours. Hyer comes Foghorn Fan. She'll chirp in a vote, too, I allow!"

The girl sport, who was well known in Tarpot—admired and yet feared by all—sauntered up, puffing leisurely away at a cigarette, while her keen gaze swept the faces of the crowd, until it rested upon that of the man from Idaho.

"Hillo, thar, Foghorn!" yelled Bill Ambrose. "Jest trot yer pedals this way. D'ye know this hyer galoot? Ye war on ther stage to-night, I allow!"

"I was!" the girl responded. "What of it?"

"Waal, hain't this the chap that stopped the 'hearse,' an' made ye pony up fer the benefit o' the widders an' orphans?"

Foghorn Fan took a good, square look at the accused sport, and then shook her head.

"I reckon not," she said. "This man looks a good bit like Yreka Jim, but 'tain't him, just as hard. I've seen Jamesy several times, and I've got his photograph down fine, you bet. No. This chap ain't Yreka Jim!"

"Bah! Git out! Ye'r lyin', Foghorn. We all allow this 'ere sport aire purty hefty on gud looks, an' all thet sort o' thing, but this ain't no time fer mashin'. This galoot aire charged wi' bein' Yreka Jim, an' shovin' ther queer, an' we're goin' ter hang him!"

"Can't help that," Foghorn replied, coolly. "Ef ye hang this chap, ye won't be 'hangin' Yreka, that's a dead sure thing!"

"Git eout! All ther passengers 'cept you agree it's the Gold-Gatherer; so the odds is ag'in' you, anyhow."

"It don't make any difference. I'm bettin' I kin prove 'tain't Yreka Jim."

"How?"

"Well, how long hes this chap been in camp?"

"Since about the time ther six o'clock whistle blowed, over at ther crusher. He then rid inter camp an' prevented the boys from hangin' Jack Impree."

"Ye'r sure about this?"

"You bet!"

"Well, it war jest half-past six, by my chronometer, which keeps time wi' ther best of 'em, when Yreka Jim halted the stage ten miles from Tarpot, an' invited us to shell out our shekels. Ef ye kin explain how the prisoner got from Tarpot to the scene of the stage robbery in half an hour, ye kin make it more probable that the two aire one!"

The crowd uttered a murmur of surprise.

It looked plain enough now that Idaho Ned was able to prove an *alibi*.

"Waal, that's yer say fer it," Bill Ambrose growled. "But, ther boys hev named mesheriff o' this town, an' I don't believe all I hear. Anyhow, be ther galoot Yreka Jim or no, he's guilty o' shovin' the queer, an' that's a penal offense. Tharfore, he's got ter swing. Hain't them ther sentiments, boys?"

"Hurrah! yes!" the crowd cried. "He stuck his nose in at ther other 'bee'—let him stick his hull head in this time!"

The proposal seemed to meet with approval, and the crowd surged a few inches nearer to the sport.

"Guess you'll surrender now, won't ye?" Bill Ambrose chuckled. "Things don't look so gilt-edged hyer, as they mought, fer ye."

Idaho did not reply. His searching gaze roved over the sea of faces restlessly; his features had a set, stern look, and his eyes a determined expression.

His gaze and that of Foghorn Fan met for an instant, and he knew that the girl was his friend; but, what could she or he do against such overwhelming odds?

"Come! We ain't goin' ter wait all night, cuss ye! Aire ye goin' ter surrender peaceably, or shall we salivate ye where ye aire?" snarled Ambrose.

"Salivate him?" cried Jim Cephas, lurching forward, full up to the neck with bad liquor. "Waal, neow, boys, ther cuss what salervates him dies wi' his throttle-valve screwed down. He's square, is ther galoot from Idaho, an' as long's I run this hyer town, he's welcome ter the best in ther land, you bet!"

"Gentlemen, I will not surrender!" Idaho Ned cried, suddenly lifting a pair of cocked six-shooters from his boot-legs, and holding them ready for use. "If you want a funeral hyer in Tarpot I'll be one o' the bearers."

"Yas, and I'll help to plant the first galoot that fires a shot!" Foghorn Fan cried, in a ringing voice. "This chap ain't Yreka Jim, and I'll take the responsibility of nailin' every man who offers to shoot!"

For an instant there was dead silence in the room. Fifty men stood with drawn weapons, glaring at the sport, who returned their stare fearlessly. Fifty men stood ready to put out the light of his lamp of life, as it were, and yet hesitated!

Were they afraid to begin the battle?

It would seem so.

Idaho Ned broke the silence.

"I have told you I was not Yreka Jim, and it has been proven to you. The counterfeit I am blameless for. Now, then, if there is any five men who feel personally aggrieved, I'll meet them, hand-to-hand, with knives, to settle this trouble. If I go under, so be it. If I come out on top, I am free to come and go as I please, without any more of this sort of molestation! Is that not fair?"

A murmur of astonishment ran through the crowd.

Five to one, in a hand-to-hand knife conflict! Was the stalwart Idahoan crazy?

"D'ye mean it?" Bill Ambrose demanded, incredulously, and secretly admiring the sport's grit.

"I mean it, providing I have assurance of my

freedom, and decent treatment, if I win, so long as I may choose to remain in Tarpot!"

"Hooray! It's a bargain!" bawled Jim Cephas, steadying himself against a table, to prevent losing his equilibrium. "I run this hyer town, an' w'ot I say goes!"

"Ye'r'a liar!" shouted old Bullfrog Benjamin.

"I run this hyer burg, myself—I, ther great gelorious Tarpot, arter whom we aire named. Founder o' ther burg, am I, an' curs'd be the gerloot w'ot sez I ain't ther boss, around these parts!"

The proposition of the sport was hailed with delight, by the crowd, in general. Such a conflict, was even a greater treat than a Judge Lynch soiree.

The crowd was scattered, and a large ring roped off in the middle of the great gambling apartment, on the floor of which more than one drop of blood had already been spilled.

Idaho Ned stepped into this ring at once, ready for the struggle. He had thrown off his coat, and hat, and now grasped a formidable hunting knife, in his right hand.

His face was set and stern; it was plainly evident that he had no intention of losing!

"I am ready, sir!" he announced, turning to Bill Ambrose. "Pick out your five men, let 'em loose in the ring, and then count three!"

A murmur of wonder again passed among the crowd.

No man of such nerve ever before had disported himself within the precincts of Tarpot. Even the burly Ambrose looked astonished, and went about selecting his men, hesitatingly, as if he felt rather ashamed to put so great odds against a man as brave as the Idahoan.

Foghorn Fan watched the proceedings eagerly.

"Are you so confident?" she asked, in an undertone, as she leaned over the ropes, and touched the sport.

"Perfectly!" he replied. "I've been in tighter places than this!"

He smiled at her, good-naturedly, and then took time to glance toward Idyl Impree.

He saw that she was very pale, and that she was locking up her weapons, and making hurried preparations to leave the room. She evidently had no desire to witness the bloody conflict.

Ambrose was not long in choosing his men.

Five muscular and savage-looking ruffians soon stood within the ring, facing Idaho Ned, armed with knives of various patterns.

"All ready!" Ambrose cried. "It's kill, or git killed, boys. When I cry three, go fer him."

There was a pause.

A silence so intense that a pin-fall could have been heard.

Then as Idyl Impree hurried across the room, toward the door, Ambrose cried:

"One!"

Each man put his right foot forward.

"Two!"

"Three! Go!"

CHAPTER VIII.

ABOUT A WILL.

ABOUT the time that Bill Ambrose's stentorian voice uttered the all-important word "three,"

Mrs. Ichabod Impree sat in the parlor of the cozy home her husband had made her mistress of on bringing her to Tarpot.

The appointments of the parlor were all modern, and a lavish expenditure of money had contributed to make it a place of beauty, that would have done credit to many an Eastern home.

Mrs. Impree was a tall, finely-formed woman of thirty or thereabouts, with a stately bearing, a coldly handsome face, blonde hair and lily complexion, and the air of one born to queen it over a wealthy man's home.

There was nothing about her to betoken that she had not always lived in luxury; she dressed with careful taste, and was plainly well-fitted for the position she occupied.

The Impree home was at the lower end of the settlement, and consequently somewhat isolated from the spot that had witnessed the attempted lynching of the mine-owner.

Mrs. Impree was engaged in looking over the evening mail, and appeared to dwell particularly over the contents of one letter.

It was a man's hand-writing, and ran as follows:

"DEAREST CLARICE:—By the time this reaches you, I shall be nearing the place of your residence, *via* stage.

"Notwithstanding that one fatal move of yours has raised a barrier to our future happiness, I trust you will be glad to see me, for I am confident that you still love me, although you are another's wife.

"Have you made out as well as you expected when you married my relative?

"Sincerely, I hope not, for then I shall believe that my chances bid fair for some day winning you.

"But I can tell you more when I see you.

"Yours forever, until death do us part.

"AARON WYGANT."

Such was the communication that Mrs. Impree held before her, and read and re-read, until it seemed as if she must have every word engraven on her mind.

Her face too, wore a strange expression—partly of eagerness and gladness, at the tidings, it would seem; partly of cynicism at the conventionally lover-like character of the letter.

"I wish he had not started so soon," she murmured, a slight frown coming to her brows. "It might spoil all my plans. Still he may be of help to me."

She hastily put the letter in her pocket, as there came a rap on the hall door, and her own colored sarvant thrust his black head into the room.

"Fo' de Lor', missus, did youh hear de news?" he cried, his eyes literally as big as saucers, and rolling in excitement.

"No, Julius. What, now, has occurred?" Mrs. Impree asked, languidly.

"Why, youh see, missus, dar's been trouble up in de town. De miners dey hab a congregatin', an' pass res'lushums dat you's a nuisance in de town!"

"A what?" Mrs. Impree almost screamed.

"A nuisance, mum. Dey say you's stuck-up an' high-heeled, an' dey hain't got no sort of use fer you, an' you'b got to git up an' skin out!"

"Why, Julius, who told you this extraordina-

ry yarn? Some one must have been trying to put up a practical joke on you."

"'Deed an' gum, no, missus. I jes' hearn all 'bout it, up-town. Dar ain't no sell about it, fo' suah!"

"Sure?"

"Dead sure! Ef you don't shoulder youh Sarah-toga an' strike fo' home-base, de chaps dat calls 'emselfes galoots, is goin' to rotten-aig you!"

"Mercy! worse and worse! I shall appeal to my husband!"

"Dat won't do no good, honey. De gen'men dat calls 'emselfes galoots, dey peeled to youh husband, too, ter hab you bounced from de town, an' when he refused dey hung him up to a tree."

Mrs. Impree put up her hands in righteous horror.

"Did it hurt him?" she inquired, with doubtful anxiety.

"Hurt him?" echoed Julius, in open-mouthed amazement at her apparent ignorance on matters of such vital importance—"hurt him? Well, I should cackle! Jes' youh git yer froat in de noose once an' see if de collar don' fit dog-goned tight. Guess de boss would hab gone on a thru excursion to Canaan only dat he was shot down, an' took to de offis an' resur-rected."

"Then, he is not seriously injured?"

"'Spect not, leastwise, not dead. Done keeps hisself locked up in de offis, howebber."

Mrs. Impree picked up a novel from a table near at hand, and began to turn over the leaves.

"You can close up the house for the night, Julius. If Mr. Impree chooses to stay away from me until this late hour, he can as well seek lodgings at the hotel."

"Yes'm. Dar ain't no danger we git de dose ob tar 'fore mornin', is dar?"

"Of course not, you stupid!"

Julius bowed, and took his departure, nodding his head knowingly.

"Yes, dar's one t'ing shore!" he muttered.

"De missus am slingin' herself scrumptious since she cotched dis fine home, an' she don't keer no mo' fo' de boss dan an alligator does fo' strawberrum short-cake. Jes' bet dis chile knows a thing or two, an' I'se shore ob one t'ing—dat de marriage life ob Ichabod Impree and wife won't be werry harmonious."

And he was right.

The hour was nearly eleven when he formed the opinion; at that same time the light still shone through the crevices in the door of Ichabod Impree's office.

A man stood without the building in an attitude of listening.

He was ordinarily dressed, wore a full, brown beard, and was in no wise more particularly noticeable than a score of other every-day citizens of Tarpot.

An eagerness about his demeanor, however, showed that he was concerned to know what was going on within the office.

There was no stir, or sound of conversation, to indicate that any one was within; yet, he seemed positive that some business of importance was being transacted.

Up at the Quartz House there was a general

commotion; but the prowler had no eyes in that direction.

He hung around the office persistently.

Now his ear was on a level with the crack under the door; then his gaze was applied to the key-hole.

The minutes that sped by, and grew into hours, seemed to have no effect on his patience.

As the time passed, the sounds of revelry gradually subsided up at the Quartz House, the main street became deserted, and Tarpot City slumbered.

Still the prowler kept his vigil outside the office, as if determined not to give up, if forced to stay there permanently.

He was rewarded at last, however.

The hands of his watch had not long before indicated that it was two o'clock A. M., when the door of the office opened.

The watcher had just time to dart around the corner of the building when a man left the office and walked away.

He was a slender, spindle-legged individual, wearing a swallow-tailed coat and the air of a man who, by profession, wrestled with Blackstone.

The prowler allowed him to get a short distance from the office; then stole swiftly after him.

The man soon turned off the main street, and made for a cabin on the outskirts of the camp.

Before he reached it, however, the heavy grasp of the pursuer fell upon his shoulder, and caused him to face about.

"Just tarry a bit, if you please," the nocturnal prowler advised, exhibiting a cocked revolver. "I've got a little business to transact with you, my man, and you will find it good for your health to keep quiet and civil. What's your name?"

"Dionysius Dodge!" the captive promptly but nervously answered. He evidently stood in mortal terror of the strong-handed interrogator and his six-shooter.

"Diodysius Dodge, eh? Well, now, that's a clever name to tote around; too good, I should say, for the man. By the way, Mr. Dodge, what is your vocation—a lawyer, I presume?"

"I am a lawyer," the little man replied, regaining his dignity to some extent. "I am not only a lawyer, but the only lawyer in Tarpot."

"Heaven spare the mark, then!" cried the man with the revolver. "But that is neither here nor there. What was you doing in Ichabod Impree's office, up to this late hour?"

"That does not concern you, sir."

"Don't it? Now, I rather reckon you're wrong. Just you tell me what you was doing, or I'll blow your brains out!" and the revolver-hammer came back to full cock with a dangerously suggestive click.

"Stop! Don't shoot. I was transacting some business!"

"Oh! was you? What kind of business?"

"Writing, sir, writing."

"What were you writing?"

Dionysius hesitated, as if loth to divulge the secret.

"Come! no monkeyin' around the bush, you man!" he of the revolver cried savagely. "I'd just like to perforate you."

"But I never did anything to you."

"Lucky for you, or you'd have been dead long ago. Come, be brisk! I've no time to fool away!"

"Well, I was drawing up a will!" Dodge blurted out. "I reckon I'd catch it, if it was known I told!"

"Indeed! Impree's will?"

"Yes!"

"What's he makin' it for? Does he expect to peg out soon?"

"I don't know, I am sure. He came very near getting hung to-night."

"So I am aware. More scared than hurt, I presume."

"Neither. He was not particularly injured, and is far from the man to be easily scared."

The man of the revolver coughed as if he did not exactly coincide with the barrister's ideas.

He reached in his pockets and drew out a handful of gold coin.

"Here!" he said, extending it. "You poor devils ought to be rewarded for the amount of lying and cheating you have to do, to get a living. Now, tell me about this will. Who gits the boodle, when Ichabod Impree turns up his toes?"

"The new Mrs. Impree gets the lion's share of it."

"What is the estimated valuation of what Ichabod Impree will leave behind, at his death?"

"He recently refused a hundred and thirty thousand for his mining interests; then I believe he has some twenty thousand in cash."

"Hum! And so the new Mrs. Impree gets the most of this?"

"Three-quarters."

"And the girl, Idyl, gets the remainder?"

"Not much!"

"What?"

"Miss Idyl gets about what old Mother Hubbard's dog got. When the estate is settled up, she will get one solitary dollar toward buying her a wedding-dress!"

"The man of the revolver uttered a malediction."

"The worst I ever heard!" he ejaculated.

"But who gets the remainder?"

"The last one that would naturally be expected—Yreka Jim, the road-agent!" Dionysius Dodge declared, drawing himself up importantly.

If the information was surprising to the man with the revolver he did not betray it. He regarded the legal light of Tarpot, a moment keenly and then turned abruptly and walked away.

CHAPTER IX.

"TOP O' THE HEAP."

To return to the Quartz House.

As the voice of Bill Ambrose rung through the great gaming-room, pronouncing the important battle-signal, "Three!" the five men with one fierce yell bounded toward where Idaho Ned was standing; but he moved forward almost as quickly as they—quicker, even, for a flying

and almost incredible leap took him over their heads!

Then the moment he touched the floor it was to wheel: his knife flashed through the air with lightning rapidity; four screams of pain, and the four men who had entered the ring to kill the sport dropped their weapons to leave the ring in horrified haste.

The fifth man, seeing this, dropped on his knees and threw up his hands in an appeal for mercy.

Idaho regarded him an instant in piteous contempt, then motioned him to follow the example of his comrades.

It was not a bloodless battle, but it had certainly been won in an almost incredibly short space of time.

And Idaho Ned was the victor!

Only four swift blows had he struck, but they had been effective.

Four right arms had been rendered unfit for use by the rapid knife-thrusts, and the four owners now engaged in holding the injured members with their left hands, while they danced and howled with pain and rage.

The excitement in the room for a few minutes was tremendous, but Idaho Ned retained his composure.

"Gents!" he ejaculated, "I presume you're willing to call it quits wi' me!"

There was a shout of assent from the majority of the miners. Evidently they had seen enough of the sport to regard him as more valuable as a friend than as an enemy.

"Yas, I reckon we'll hev ter let up on ye fer now," Bill Ambrose growled regretfully, "'ca'se ye didn't take water on yer own brag. Mind, tho', ye're a 'spicious character, an' ef ye cut up any more shines hyer in Tarpot we won't stop fer parley, but yank ye up instanter!"

"Your warning is duly appreciated," Ned said, stepping from the ring and putting on his coat and hat. "You will find me an easy mortal to get along with, if you don't try to tread on my toes. A chuck under the chin will always win me over quicker than a kick on the shins."

The wounded duelists had left the saloon to get their arms attended to, and the place soon became quieted down to its regulation order.

Idaho purchased a cigar and then went and sat down by a card-table to enjoy a smoke.

He had sat there but a few minutes when he was joined by Foghorn Fan, who made herself free to occupy the chair opposite him.

"Scuse me," she said, lighting a cigarette, "but I saw you looked rather lonesome like, and I tho't mebbe ye wouldn't mind answering me a few questions."

"Certainly not, if they are of a nature I can answer."

"Oh! you bet they are! I jest wanted ter ax you if you don't think you're runnin' a good deal of risk?"

"How do you mean?"

"Why, in hangin' round camp, here. Of course you stand first, so fur as victory is concerned, but ye'r' just as likely ter be popped over any minute as not."

"Think so? Well, I don't know about that.

I guess the galoots count it safest to let me alone."

"Don't fool yourself. They may be kinder meek an' quiet fer a few hours, but you'll find that they're wolves, every inch of 'em. They like money, ye know, an' the reward aire a big temptation."

"The reward?"

"Yes."

"Ah! I think I comprehend. You mean to intimate that the people still believe me to be Yreka Jim."

"You bet!"

"Pshaw! Don't you think your explanation fully dispelled that idea?"

"No! It might have carried weight with a certain few, but the gang, as a whole, hold firm grip to the notion that you and Yreka aire one and the same person."

"Well, if this be true, they can keep right on thinking so, for all I care. How do you feel about the matter? Perhaps you believe I am Yreka Jim?"

"If this was an age o' miracles, I'd bet my last cart-wheel you are. But as nothin' short o' a miracle could hev put Yreka Jim in two distant points at the same time, I reckon it's purty straight that there aire two o' you that looks just alike."

"Very likely. I think I shall have to write this festive gent of the road for his photograph to see how great is the resemblance between us!"

Foghorn Fan did not reply, but gazed at the sport keenly.

She was evidently trying to study out the problem whether Yreka Jim and Idaho Ned were one and the same.

It was not an easy problem to solve, however.

"So you think I am in imminent danger of getting salivated at any minute, eh?" the sport went on.

"Yes."

"Who by?"

"Well, that depends. Bill Ambrose is a treacherous cuss and will bear watching at any time. Then there's Jim Cephas, he's another mean skunk. You'll be apt to hear from him when he gets sober. He's everybody's friend when he's b'ilin' full o' whisky—everybody's enemy, when he's sober."

"Oh! I guess Cephas and I will get along all right."

"It'll be a wonder if ye do. You know he belongs to the Black List?"

"Or rather, I do not know. Who or what is the Black List?"

"I hardly know myself, more than that it is a secret order of desperadoes or adventurers who are pledged not so much to one another's interests as to the accumulation of a big sum of money which in the end is to be divided among those who remain in the order at a certain date. The society numbers a dozen. There is a weekly meeting and a drawing of lots. If it falls to you, you either have to pay in a certain amount of money within a given time or be shot. If you are able to buy off, well and good; the order is just so much richer. When a cuss who is selected by lot can't fork over his ransom a committee ends him. When one drops out that way, a new member is by some method pressed

in, or coaxed to keep the order up to its regular membership.

Idaho Ned listened with interest. He had heard something concerning a similar order, up in the territory to the north.

"Who gets this blood-money?" he asked, thoughtfully.

"I don't know. I reckon it's divided up among the other members, as I said, at the end of a certain time."

"And you say Cephas is a member of this society?"

"That's the calculation, although no one knows for certain."

"Are there any others you would be likely to suspect?"

"No!"

"Then at last I am on the right track!" the sport said, bringing his fist heavily down on the table. "I am on the right track, and you must help me, girl. If we succeed, you shall be liberally rewarded."

Foghorn Fan gazed at him shrewdly.

"I help you?" she ejaculated. "Why, of what assistance can I be?"

"Listen, and I will tell you," he said, speaking in an earnest tone, and leaning across the table, toward her.

The flush of excitement upon his cheeks made him even handsomer than usual; a brilliant sparkling of his magnetic eyes.

Foghorn Fan heard what he had to say, her own face betraying expressions both of curiosity and surprise.

When he was through, she drummed on the table a moment, idly, and then looked at him, searchingly.

"And so you, a stranger to me, want me to do that?" she demanded, without specifying what.

"I do!" Idaho Ned declared, eagerly. "Do it, and you need have no fear but what you will be properly rewarded."

"Very well. I will do it, upon one consideration?"

"And that is?"

"That you will own the truth, shame the devil, and acknowledge yourself to be Yreka Jim, the road-agent!"

"It's a bargain. I am that somewhat distinguished gentleman! The place where the stage was robbed is accessible, from Tarpot, in ten minutes' rapid ride, by a cross-cut route. I was in Tarpot, ten minutes after I robbed the stage!"

CHAPTER X.

MURDER!

ALTHOUGH the hour was late, when the man with the revolver somewhat forcibly interviewed Tarpot's legal light, Mr. Dionysius Dodge, the events of that night were by no means ended.

An hour, perhaps, after the attorney's departure from the Impree office, the shadows of dark forms once more hovered around it.

As early as daybreak, the next morning, a miner in passing the office, noticed that a light was still burning within, as it had burned early the previous evening.

Thinking it rather curious, he continued on to

the Quartz House, where, over his morning "bracer," he announced his discovery to those citizens who were up with the birds for an "eye-opener" at the Quartz House bar.

"Yas, there's a light burnin', sure!" the miner, Dutton, declared. "It luks kinder quare to me, bein' as Ick. Impree never made a practice o' settin' up all night, before. I reckon we orter take it onter ourselves ter investigate!"

"Jest w'ot I'm bound to see done!" declared Bum Bowler, one of the "cast-iron" of Tarpot. "I'm fer investergatin' anything that promises fun an' guzzle."

Several others assented, and at least a dozen miners soon left the hotel, and repaired to the office, where, sure enough, a line of light could be detected shining in under the door.

"Come! open up in thar!" Bum Bowler cried, pounding on the door. "The sun is risin', ther birds aire twitterin', an' Tarpot aire as fly as ever!"

"You bet she aire, espeshually old Benjamin Tarpot, ther originator and founder!" chimed in the bullwhacker who was one of the party.

Bowler's rap upon the office door elicited no answer; nor was there any sound indicating human presence within.

"Reckon ther boss went hum, an' fergot ter put out the lights!" Bowler commented, "fer thar don't appear to be any one on the inside."

"Mebbe suthin' has happen'd. Mebbe the boss has croaked, thru ther throat deficulty," a miner suggested.

"Break in ther door an' see!" suggested another.

A short consultation ensued, the upshot of which was that it was decided to break in the door.

This was an easy job, as was proven, when several of the men threw their force against the door, and it flew open with a bang.

Within the office, upon the table, the lamp was burning brightly; but this was not what riveted the attention of the investigating committee, and caused a simultaneous ejaculation of surprise to escape their lips.

The sight they beheld was well calculated to startle and horrify.

Sitting upright, in arm-chairs at the table, were two headless bodies.

The one, evidently, was that of Ichabod Impree, the mine-owner—the other that of Skin McCarg, Impree's dwarfed clerk.

The mine-owner's arms rested upon the table, and in his right hand was an affixed pen, below which was a sheet of paper.

The dwarf's hands hung limp and nerveless by his side.

Murder most foul plainly had been committed, and the mine-owner and his clerk were the victims.

The beholders stood for a few minutes, awed and horrified, beyond expression, at the ghastly sight. Bum Bowler was the first to break the silence.

"By thunder, boys, this is the toughest thing yet. Some o' ye go an' rouse the town!"

Several of the party started off in mad haste, to spread the tidings; the others entered the office, and looked about.

The floor was blood-stained, in many places, but otherwise, there was no sign of a struggle.

The heads belonging to the decapitated trunks, were nowhere to be found; nor was there any evidence that the murder had been committed for money.

The burglar-proof safe in which Impree kept his money and papers was securely locked, and what few papers lay upon the table were of no importance, nor served to throw any light upon the tragedy.

The news of the murder spread like wild-fire, and half of Tarpot's populace was assembled about the office, in an incredibly short space of time.

News of the crime was brought to the Impree residence, and broken to the bride-widow, whereupon she went into hysterics, and fainted.

When the report reached the Quartz House, Idyl Impree had just got out her target rifles, and was cleaning them up, preparatory to beginning business for the day.

She appeared to be in rather depressed spirits. There was a weary expression about her eyes, proving that she had not rested well, during the night.

On hearing of the murder, Idaho Ned was the first one who was thoughtful enough to break the news to her.

He approached her stand, wondering how he could best break the sad news, without violently shocking her.

"Good-morning, Miss Impree!" he saluted, doffing his hat. "I trust to find you feeling well, this morning?"

"Usually well, thank you. Pardon me, but I scarcely expected to see *you* looking so well!"

"I dare say not. It was the general expectation, I believe, that I would be a subject for a coroner's inquest, this morning?"

"Oh! yes. I was almost sure you would be killed. I could not bear to witness the fight, and so I hastened from the room."

"So I noticed. I was sanguine of victory, or else I should not have proposed the contest. Then, too, you know, it was necessary for me to distinguish myself enough to acquire a license to remain in Tarpot. By the way, Miss Impree, it becomes my sad duty to break to you an unwelcome piece of news. I trust you will nerve yourself to be strong; for, even though affliction comes to us ail, at different periods of our life, there is nothing gained by giving away to excessive grief. We are commanded not to mourn, and in this respect, as well as others, we should all steel ourselves to obey the Divine laws!"

A wave of pallor swept she roses from her cheeks, and she clutched the counter for support.

"My father—" she faltered.

"Has been foully murdered!" the sport finished, gravely. "I beg of you to be brave, Miss Impree, and not give way. I took it upon myself to break the sad news to you, trusting you might not be so badly shocked as if you had been apprised by some rough, well-meaning, but blundering miner. The truth is terrible, in this instance, 'tis true, but I hope you will be brave, and bear up under the affliction like a brave woman."

He was forced to pause, hardly knowing how to further express himself, and fearing to say more, lest it make matters worse.

With a face almost corpse-like in the intensity of its whiteness, Idyl heard him through.

Tears did not come to her relief, but it was plain that she was suffering untold grief.

"Go on!" she gasped, in a choked voice—"tell me all!"

Idaho did so, explaining how the headless bodies had been discovered in the office, with no clew to point to the identity of the guilty person.

He occupied several minutes in discussing the affair, and by the time he was done he was aware that he had, to some extent, tided her over the first shock of her horror and anguish.

When he had ceased speaking, she gazed steadfastly at the floor for a few minutes before she spoke.

"I am very grateful to you, sir," she finally said, "for telling me of this unexpected calamity. Strange though it may seem to you, I knew nothing of the attempt to lynch Ichabod Impree, until I left the Quartz last night. It shocked me beyond expression, and in truth, I was not unprepared to hear that he had been killed. Of course I am deeply grieved—more than words can express—but, as you say, it is not the part of a brave woman to give away entirely to one's feelings. Have you any idea as to the purpose of this terrible crime?"

"If I have, I shall not spread it broadcast at present, but quietly work to bring the atrocious fiends to justice. You speak of your father as Ichabod Impree, I take notice. I infer by that that you hardly look upon him as a parent."

She bit her lip an instant, as if undecided how to answer him; then a firmer expression came upon her face.

"Until he brought home the new Mrs. Impree, I regarded him as a kind and loving parent. When she came, all was changed. We could not agree, and she used her influence against me. Finally, she declared to me that he had told her I was not his child at all. I left, then, leaving him a note, explaining what she had told me. As he never asked me to come back, or even spoke to me, I have naturally concluded that I was not his child, and have never looked upon him since as a parent."

"You, then, believe that your father did declare that you were not his child?"

"Yes. I might have doubted, had he been as kind to me after marriage as before, but he was not."

"There might be a possibility the letter you left for him did not reach him."

"Not likely; for, even had he not received it, if I was aught to him would he not be apt to inquire into the cause of my leaving?"

"It would seem so, at least. Have you always lived with him as his child?"

"Yes, ever since I can remember."

Idaho was silent for a moment.

His face wore an expression that one could not easily interpret.

"We shall have to look into the matter, in conjunction with the mystery of the murder, Miss Idyl!" he said, deliberately. "It is my candid opinion that you are Ichabod Impree's

daughter, and there is some trickery and fraud on foot to cheat you out of both name and fortune."

"Do you really think so?"

"I do, indeed."

"Oh! if it only were so! But, I cannot bring myself to believe it."

"Will you go to the house?"

"If there is a funeral, I shall certainly attend, as a mourner. Further than that, is for the new Mrs. Impree to arrange!"

CHAPTER XI.

A DAY OF BULLETINS.

NEVER in the history of Tarpot City had sensation or excitement equaled that caused by the murder of Ichabod Impree and his business clerk, Skin McCarg.

Not only was the crime shocking and horrible in all its details, but there were no clues to follow in ferreting for the murderer.

Among the first who reached the office, after the news of the murder became current, was Aaron Wygant and son.

The former at once made known his relation to the deceased mine-owner, and expressed the profoundest grief at his untimely fate.

"This is a terrible crime, gentlemen," he said, addressing the crowd, "and although I hear that a number of you were concerned in an attempt to visit lynch-law on my deceased relative, I believe there is not a man of you but what will say the parties or party who committed this awful deed ought to be hounded down to death!"

There was an audible expression of assent. The enormity of the crime seemed to have caused a revulsion of feeling among those wild spirits, that a few hours before had been in an ecstasy of delight at the prospect of seeing Ichabod Impree's corpse dangling in mid-air.

"Yas, we allow et's a dirty mean trick!" Jim Cephas declared, having somewhat recovered from his last night's debauch. "'Cept he war as ornery stubborn as a Texas steer, Ick. Impree war a first-class feller, an' whoever had a hand in this job orter be toasted over hot coals. When I vocabulate I represent ther sentiments o' the boys!"

Aaron Wygant, being a relative of the deceased proprietor, was rather looked to to make all arrangements; accordingly he had the remains laid out in the office, to be kept there until further arrangements were made for burial.

It would not be wise to take them to the mine-owner's residence, he argued, as Mrs. Impree was greatly prostrated over the shock, and more serious results might ensue.

Among the miners the excitement ran high, and loud and fierce were the threats against the author of the tragedy.

A subscription was started by Idaho Ned, toward raising a reward, and if met with immediate favor.

A paper was tacked up against the door of the Quartz House, and all who wished to help along the cause were invited to attach their signature to the paper, with the amount of their donation set opposite, and hand over the cash to old Tarpot, who had unanimously been

elected treasurer, he having, singularly enough, a reputation for honesty.

Idaho, in starting the subscription, headed it with one hundred dollars, and in so doing, did more toward ingratiating himself in the regards of the people than any other course he could have adopted.

Foghorn Fan came next, with fifty dollars, while the smaller sums flowed in fast, and there was a prospect that the sum would be swelled to a thousand dollars or more.

About noon, while old Tarpot had slipped into the hotel, for a "hummer," the following notice was posted on the door, just below the subscription list.

Who placed it there, or how, without being discovered, was a puzzle no easier of solution than the mystery overhanging the man whose signature was appended.

"NOTICE.

"It having come to my notice that Ichabod Impree has been foully dealt with, and believing the author of the crime hangs out in Tarpot I do, on my own account, offer a reward of one thousand dollars for the arrest and execution of the murderer or murderers.

Three of your former citizens, who do service under my flag, in behalf of the widows and orphans—namely: Big Blobbs, Freckled-Face Frank, and Six-Toed Sol, also contribute a hundred dollars apiece, in the way of an offer, and we'll hand it over to the man who brings the murderer of Ichabod Impree to justice.

"(Signed)

YREKA JIM,

"The Gold-Gatherer."

When the citizens of Tarpot came to feast their eyes upon this notice, there was another sensation, in earnest.

Old Bullfrog Benjamin became a much-questioned person, but, for the life of him he could not explain how the notice had come on the door, nor who had placed it there.

Within an hour after it was discovered, still another notice occupied the door.

It ran thus:

"\$500.00 Reward. The citizens of Tarpot will pay the above sum for the capture and delivery to justice of the outlaw who calls himself Yreka Jim.

"By order of

COMMITTEE."

So that, at all events, the festive Gold-Gatherer's manifested interest in the murder case had not won him a place in the hearts of the miners of Tarpot.

Among others who viewed the bulletin were Idaho Ned and Foghorn Fan.

The girl seemed to have formed a strong admiration for the sport—as, indeed, 'most any young woman of a susceptible nature must have done—and she sought his company as a sort of partner, which, in fact, she might be considered.

"The racket don't seem to work!" she said, addressing him in an undertone. "They ain't werry partial to Yreka Jim!"

"So I perceive," he replied. "It seems that I must hang on to Idaho Ned while I salubriate in Tarpot. I was in hopes I could work it so as to introduce myself in flying colors. It is not exactly safe, however. I think, though, that I have effectually made myself distinct from the Gold-Gatherer."

"Mebbe. Time will develop as to that. What do you think of the murder?"

"Without answering you, allow me to ask you what you think of it?"

"I don't think much about it, for the single reason that I don't know what to think."

"Haven't formed any idea at all, I suppose?"

"Not in particular."

"Did it strike you that any of the members of the *Black List* were concerned in the crime?"

"I hardly believe it. Not Cephas, at any rate, I should say."

"Do you suppose Cephas is captain of the band?"

"Possibly so—yet not likely to be. He is not smart enough to be at the head of such a clique, although no one really knows what the organization is for. If it is not in the road-agent business nor a nest of counterfeiters, I can't see anything in it except money—the big pile that is to come from the sums that are paid in by those who draw the pay-or-die number."

Idaho Ned then related to her what he had learned from Idyl's lips.

"Humph!" the girl sport said, drumming on the veranda with the gold-headed walking-stick she carried. "I always thought it queer about her, though I never tried to pry into the matter."

"Don't it look as if the new Mrs. Impree had been working up a new case of shenanigan, eh?"

"It has a savoring that way. Investigation all around might open up some startling facts."

"My idea, exactly! The turn of these miners of Tarpot in a body against her suggests that there must be *something* disparaging about her. We will watch and wait, and while you are about it, it may not come amiss to casually observe the movements of this new relative who has turned up—Mr. Aaron Wygant, of New York."

It was a day of bulletins.

During the afternoon, Aaron Wygant posted the following on the hotel door:

NOTICE.

"The employes of the late Ichabod Impree, deceased, are hereby notified to go to work, as the death will necessitate no stoppage in the mines, and business will be transacted by the widow Impree or her authorized agent."

This notice posted, there remained but one space upon the Quartz House door, and a poster to fit it was soon forthcoming:

"NOTICE.

"This is to certify that the miners of Tarpot do positively refuse to go to work until the latest will of Ichabod Impree is produced and they know who they're working for. This is bizness, an' the orphan shall not suffer.

JIM CEPHAS,
"Mine-boss."

CHAPTER XII.

A CALL ON MRS. IMPREE.

PREVIOUS to the posting of the notice for the men to resume work, Aaron Wygant had paid a visit of business and condolence to the widow Impree.

He found her seated in the parlor, engaged in sipping a glass of claret, magnificently dressed,

and looking little like a person who had recently fainted, or who was excessively grief-stricken.

She bowed with a faint smile, and motioned her visitor to a seat.

"The widow Impree, I believe?" Wygant said, bowing low, and emphasizing the word *widow* significantly.

"The same, sir," she replied, "You are Mr. Aaron Wygant. You have greatly changed since last we met."

"Have I? I was not aware of that. I have grown younger, I dare say," with a smile.

"Age has not made you appear much older than when we knew each other in better days," Clarice replied, arching her eyebrows and showing her teeth in a pretty smile. "Those were pleasant times, Mr. Wygant."

"Indeed they were, Clarice! and I have sworn that the vows we then mutually exchanged should yet be consummated. At last the looked-for time has come!"

"Don't be too sure of that," she demurred.

"Pooh! no coquetry, now. But tell me of yourself, after I lost track of you. That is nearly—let me see—"

"Allow dates to pass unmentioned, please!" she interrupted. "I pass for thirty here. Do you not think that is sufficient?"

"Well, so mote it be!" he said, dryly. "But go on. The last I heard of you—"

"I was discharged from a metropolitan bazar for complicity with the cashier in embezzlement, I was young and giddy then."

"And pardonable. My heart was with you in your trouble, as I wrote you at the time."

"Well, it was a dampener on me, and I was buffeted about for a time, at the mercy of the fates. Finally, I made the acquaintance of a gentleman who helped me to a position in the General Post-office Department at Washington. I held that position a long time, and then resigned, and married my benefactor, Ichabod Impree."

"I marveled much when I heard of the match. But I have kept track of you since, and opportunely am here to claim my old place in your regards. I suppose you have formed a suspicion in regard to the authorship of his horrible taking off?"

"No! no! I dread to think anything about it, and try not to. I have no idea who committed the awful crime!"

"I have. You have heard of Yreka Jim, the road-agent?"

"Yes."

"Well, I believe *he* did the job."

"Pooh! Why should *he*? He and Ichabod were personally unknown to each other."

"That may or may not be. I still cling to the belief that the robber had a hand in it. What about property matters?"

"That!" and she flung him a legal document. "I found it to-day, in a pocket of Ichabod's dress coat. You see it leaves everything to his girl."

"Who, I believe you wrote me, had taken leave of the parental roof?"

"Yes. She considered herself mistress when I came here; but I quickly convinced her of her error. We had a number of sharp spats, and I

nally apprised her that she had no claim upon him as a father, as he was nothing of the sort—that she was of unknown parentage, and so forth. That was enough. She is a high-spirited girl, and at once packed up her effects and left. Then warned Ichabod that he must draw a line between myself and her—that he must either give her up and never go near her, or else get rid of me!”

“And he chose you?”

“Yes—decidedly.”

“Is there a *later* will than this?”

“I do not know. I can hold a third, at least, you know.”

“Bah! what is that? We must have all, or nothing!”

“We?”

“Yes, *we*! I am entitled to a share, and we may as well pool our issues and enter into general partnership.”

“I am not so sure about that.”

“I am. With me as your right-hand man, there will be no insurmountable obstacles. Without me you might not be able to hold a cent. Perhaps you are aware that the miners of Tarpot do not regard you any too kindly?”

“I have received an intimation to that effect. I cannot understand why, however.”

“Well, one evident reason is, they don’t know how to appreciate a cultured, fashionable lady, with such tastes and style as you display. Whether the poor devil loved you or not I don’t know, but you are aware he tried to kill me, and had to leave the country to escape punishment.”

“Yes.”

“Well, Dion Drew is in Tarpot!”

“Mercy!”

“He is here, and knows you. It is through his influence, to a large extent, that the miners are down on you. He is known as Jim Cephas—the rough mine-boss.”

“This is new and startling news, indeed. That man Dion Drew? It seems incredible. If it is he why has he not sought me out?”

“Never mind this. Ichabod Impree is dead, and some one must inherit his possessions. Destroy this will and we will make another, if necessary. Or, if still a later one turns up, in favor of the girl, why—”

“What?”

“We’ll prove that she is not his daughter, but another is!”

Mrs. Impree turned pale.

“What do you mean?” she demanded, gaspingly.

“I mean that if *you* cannot inherit the fortune, Madeline shall! I have brought her with me!”

She sprung to her feet, excitedly.

“You have *not*!” she cried, greatly exasperated.

“I have,” he calmly declared. “You need not be concerned, however. She knows nothing.”

“Are you sure?”

“Perfectly. She is all right. I can fit her into the gap, with ease.”

The widow drew a breath of relief, but her eyes wore a strange, hunted expression.

They conversed together, for some time longer,

and when Aaron Wygant arose to go, he said:

“Very well. I will order the men to go to work. If no one interferes, things can move along without any bother about a will. If not, you can rely on me to be prepared—of course, in consideration that you will now marry me!”

“When everything is settled I will become your wife!” the widow declared.

The relative-from-the-East then took his departure, and the notice was shortly afterward flung out to public gaze.

How it was received, the reader is already aware.

The spirit of admiration for the widow was not on the increase among the rough denizens of Tarpot, and the prospects were that work in the Impree mines would not commence, for some time to come—not, at least, until it was definitely known who was the murdered mine-owner’s heir!

CHAPTER XIII.

A CASE OF THUMPING.

THE day after the murder dragged slowly by, and night with her dark shadows once more hovered over the town of Tarpot.

As usual, the street in the vicinity of the Quartz House, donned a holiday appearance, and was thronged; for night was the only time when the camp was practically in the height of its glory.

The main topic of conversation, as may be supposed, was the murder of Ichabod Impree, and who was to succeed him.

“Oh! his new wife will capture the boodle, on course!” a miner declared. “He was dead gone on her, an’ dassen’t say his soul war his own!”

“Ef she gits the boodle, she’ll git the rope along with it,” Jim Cephas growled. “Now, no high-minded petticoater, like her, ken boss *me*, ner them as loves me. By all natteral right ther gal, Idyl, aire ther owner o’ the mines, an’ I’m in fer s’portin’ *her* claim.”

“Allow me to say that I believe your views are right, and I heartily indorse them!” Idaho Ned supplemented, coming up in time to overhear the words of the mine-boss.

“Ye do, eh?” growled old Bullfrog. “I reckon you’ll find it healthier ter walk in the path o’ public opinion than out o’ it. Tain’t bin made plain yet, what ye’r’ doin’ heer in Tarpot, and some people w’u’d mighty well like to know.”

“That is, it would do you proud to know what fetches me here, to Tarpot?”

“You bet!” Bullfrog unhesitatingly replied.

“Well, if you all want to know, I will confess that I am a detective, and I am in this part of the country to secure the man I have been accused of being—Yreka Jim, the Gold-Gatherer! So, if any of you should happen to get your clutches upon the festive galoot, just bring him to me and I’ll give you a thousand dollars!”

“Counterfeit, same’s ye give Bill Ambrose, I s’pose,” tauntingly.

“By no means—all good money. That counterfeit has been redeemed and destroyed. And, as I was saying, boys, I am in favor of inaugurating a campaign for securing to Idyl Impree,

the murdered speculator's daughter, her rights!"

"I allow we're all o' ther same turn o' mind, or at least, near all!" Jim Cephas declared. "Ef ther gal hain't been provided fer, by ther boss, his fate war gud enough fer him."

"I was not personally acquainted with Impree, but it looks probable to me that he *must* have made some provision for her," Idaho said, gradually feeling his way into the good graces of the miners. "If not, as you intimate, he must have been a very unnatural parent!"

"That's what's the matter. Ye'r' sound as a nugget on that p'int!" Cephas agreed.

"In fact, you'll find me generally sound on all good points!" the sport observed, with one of his genial smiles. "Now, if you'll purchase stock, at par, on the strength of that, you'll not get left. But there is something I want you to know: the widow Impree will not tamely surrender the property, as I dare say she will be prepared to establish the fact that she is really the heiress. In this matter I have no doubt she will have the co-operation of a certain gentleman who has recently arrived in Tarpot. But, I'll tell you what to do, in case you so wish. Elect me your leader, in the matter of establishing Idyl Impree's rights, and we'll carry the point or bu'st, in the attempt!"

The men who had gathered around exchanged glances, and of one accord looked to Jim Cephas for the answer.

A singular, uninterpretable expression shot athwart the bully's rugged features; then, he advanced toward the Idahoan, and put out his hand.

"Shake, on that!" he said, gruffly. "So fur as the gal is concerned, we'll look to you as capt'in. I'll tell ye, tho', so's thar won't be no misunderstandin'—I don't, personally, like you, and except for the girl, I'm free to declare my self your enemy."

"Yes?"

"You bet! If you carry the p'int in favor o' the gal, we're with ye, tooth an' toe-nail; further'n that I ain't carryin' no purtic'lar amount o' stock in you."

"Very well. I admire your frankness, at least. Now, I'll tell you my plans, and I think you will agree with me: We'll wait upon the orphan in a body and tender her our sympathy, and apprise her that we intend to stand by her in securing her rights. Then, we will notify all interested to produce the last wills and testaments of Ichabod Impree. Very likely, there will be one or more presented, and we will pass upon them according to the best of our judgment."

This proposition was greeted with approval, and soon afterward over two-score of men, headed by the Idaho Apollo, entered the Quartz and presented themselves at the rifle-range, where Idyl Impree still remained.

Off came every hat as the sport doffed his own and stepped forward.

"Miss Impree!" he said, "in behalf of the citizens of Tarpot I have the honor of addressing you, to express the public sympathy with you in this hour of affliction. The citizens who have thus appointed me to represent them, wish to apprise you that they stand ready to uphold

your claims in regard to the deceased Ichabod Impree's estate, and you may rest assured that justice will be done, in your behalf."

Tears of gratitude glistened for a moment in Idyl's eyes, and she tried to speak, but could not, until after several attempts.

"I am greatly surprised, and also very grateful to you, gentlemen, for your interest in my behalf!" she finally said, "and shall not soon forget your kindness. I hope I shall ever be able to merit your friendship, but I beg you will not go to any trouble in regard to Ichabod Impree's estate. As I apprised Mr. Idaho, I have n claims upon the property. Before I left the Impree roof, to come among you for the purpose of honestly earning my own living, I was told that I was not his child. Of course, it is painful to me to make you acquainted with this fact, but I hope, though nameless, I shall be entitled to no less of your respect than though I was Ichabod Impree's daughter."

With a flushed face but brave heart she faced the audience, and uttered the words, which could but have caused her great pain.

For a moment the rude men of Tarpot were silent; then, as of one accord, they flung their hats into the air and sent up a yell that made the building tremble.

"Bravo! bravo!" rung forth. "Long life and success to Independent Idyl, the Queen o' Tarpot!"

It was some moments ere the enthusiasm waned sufficiently for any one person to be heard.

"Bravely spoken, Miss Idyl!" Idaho Ned then said heartily. "I wish you to remember, however, that it has not yet been proven that you are *not* Ichabod Impree's daughter."

"You bet it ain't!" roared Jim Cephas. "Did Ick. Impree tell ye ye wasn't his'n?"

"No. His wife did, however."

Cephas uttered a curse.

"She's a snake!" he declared. "Ick. Impree allus spoke of ye as his darter, an' nary a man of us ever heerd him say different. An' fer thet woman to make sech an accusation aire a durned shame!"

"On course—ev'ry time!" agreed the crowd.

"Gentlemen!" interposed Aaron Wygant, stepping forward, "I most sincerely and heartily admire your interest in this young lady, whom I have never had the honor of meeting before. I am in duty bound to apprise you, however, that Ichabod Impree was not the honorable man you all believed him."

"He wa'n't, hey?"

"He was not. You are aware—some of you, at least—that I arrived in Tarpot last night. Though a relative of the deceased, I came not here as an ordinary visitor. I had been hunting him for years!"

"Indeed!" was Idaho Ned's exclamation.

He was watching the Easterner narrowly.

"Yes, I had been hunting Impree for years. I will tell you why. Years ago he parted from his wife and came West. She was thrown upon the world with a child in her arms, and out of pity I took her in and cared for her. She soon took sick and died, however, and the child was left on my hands. I reared it, and since that mother's death, have sought for my relative,

determined that he should support and care for his offspring. Well, in time, I made a singular discovery. A fortune was left to Impree, providing he was the father of a legitimate child. Did he get it? Yes. Did he come back and reclaim his own child? No. He adopted a child from a poor-house, and represented it as being his own, in order to get the fortune. This adopted child he reared as his own!"

"And, accordingly, I suppose I am that one whom he took from the poor-house?" Idyl said, with a calmness that would hardly have been expected of her.

"You are!" Aaron Wygant declared. "It is an unfortunate truth, which there is no getting around. The real daughter of Ichabod Impree accompanied me to Tarpot, and is now here at the hotel. Whether there has been a will made or not, or what disposition has been made of Impree's wealth of course I know no more about than yourselves. But, one thing is certain: widow Impree was correct when she apprised this young lady that she was *not* Ichabod's daughter!"

Idyl smiled faintly.

"Very likely. I am not in the least disappointed!" she remarked. "Though a poor-house waif, I at least have a good name and a wide world before me, in which to work for an honest living."

There was another burst of applause at this.

"You bet, an' don't yer fergit it! This hyer chap hain't got it all to say. Ick. Impree allus told us ye *war* his daughter, an' as he aire dead, I opine we're takin' his word fer a heap lot more than we aire this stranger's!" Jim Cephas declared, resolutely.

"Exactly!" Idaho Ned assented. "You see, Mr. Wygant, the matter of Impree's death and the setting-up of his estate, admits of a grand opportunity for fraud, and we people of Tarpot propose to have a square deal. Ain't that it, boys?"

"You bet!" was the chorused response.

"What do you mean?" Wygant demanded angrily. "Do you mean to insult me by insinuating that I would speak a falsehood, or scheme for sordid gain?"

"Well, ef you wouldn't you're an exceptional individual, and ought to have a statue erected to your honor. I don't *know* that you are concerned in any villainy, Mr. Wygant, but I'll tell you fairly that I believe you lied infamously in the story you just related for the purpose of cheating Idyl Impree out of her birthright!"

Aaron Wygant's face flushed with rage.

"You are a liar yourself!" he cried. "You're a liar, a coward, a puppy, a thief and a—"

A single circumstance did not permit him to finish what was in his mind to say. That circumstance was embodied in the gripe of Idaho Ned's right hand, which clutched the Easterner by the throat, and suddenly shut off his wind; at the same time the sport's left palm hit Wygant a sharp whack, first on one cheek and then on the other.

The relative of the deceased mine-owner succeeded in tearing himself loose, and uttered a yell of pain and rage.

"Curse you! curse you!" he cried, shaking his fist at the sport. "I'll have revenge for this—"

I'll cut your heart out and trample it beneath my feet!" then he turned and skurried from the bar-room, followed by hoots of derision from the crowd, who, but for Idaho, would have followed and lynched him.

"Let him go!" the sport said, dryly. "He ain't long for this town!"

CHAPTER XIV.

A HARD-HEARTED DETECTIVE.

LATER that evening, as the Widow Impree sat in her parlor buried in deep thought, she had a caller. She had neglected to light the lamps, evidently preferring to mask her reflections under the cover of darkness. The windows were open, as was a door, which opened upon the street.

The first appraisal she had that she was not alone was when a slight cough attracted her attention. She looked up, with a start, and then a horrified cry pealed from her lips.

Seated in a chair, a few feet away, was the same ghostly-looking individual who had stopped the stage, early the previous night—Yreka Jim, the Gold-Gatherer!

In all respects he looked the same as when he had held the stage at bay—white, unearthly, and yet handsome.

His keen gaze rested steadily upon the face of the terrified widow, a faint smile hovering about his mustache-shaded mouth.

As for her, she was unable for a moment to utter more than the one cry. She was paralyzed with horror. She knew she was alone, none of the servants being about the premises. She feared this man before her more than any other in the wide world—not because he was Yreka Jim, the road-agent, but because she knew him!"

The very sight of him made her desperate.

Stealthily her hand crept toward the folds of her dress; a moment later a pistol was leveled toward the Gold-Gatherer's heart, a jet of flame shot forth, accompanied by the report of the weapon.

Did Yreka Jim throw up his arms and utter a dying groan?

No! A cool laugh broke from his lips as he sat there, undisturbed!

"Try it again, madam!" he said, sarcastically. "Aim more directly at my heart."

The revolver dropped from her grasp, and she uttered a gasp of exasperation.

"Curse you! Why are you here?" she faintly articulated.

"Ah! I see you know me?" he observed, calmly. "I did not think you would know me!"

"Know you, Edward Hamill? Do you think I could ever forget you?"

"Well, that depends. Should I succeed in taking you back to Washington, beauteous Clarice, I dare say you would have good cause and plenty of spare time to remember me."

"You shall never take me back!" she hissed.

"Oh, yes I will!" he replied, confidently. "I must, you know. The Government could never think of parting company with you, you know. You're too valuable—too dangerous to be allowed to roam at large!"

"Edward Hamill?"

"Well, madam!"

"Why have you hunted me down? Why, like a bloodhound, have you pursued me? Did I ever wrong you? No. A few years ago I met you, and loved you. I'd cut off my right hand to do you a good turn, even now, after you have so relentlessly haunted my every movement. A few years ago you loved me—"

"Whoa! Steady up there a bit or you'll run a wheel off. Did I ever say I loved you?"

"No, but you cannot deny that you were infatuated with me!"

"Bah! I was younger then and fresh in my profession. You were pretty, and rather attracted me, or else I would never have allowed you to slip away during the thieves'-nest raid in New York. I quickly saw that you were too wicked for redemption, and when I learned that instead of being a giddy girl of nineteen, you were nearly if not quite old enough to be my mother, and were the mother of a girl more nearly of my own age, I was disenchanted; it was, literally, a sour mash."

She bit her lips with anger.

"I am not old!" she cried. "I am nearly as young as you are, and I love you with a devotion grown ten-fold stronger than then! How can you be so merciless?"

"We will not discuss the question of age. As to mercy, I do not dabble extensively in that. It's a quality that detectives must needs banish from their stock in trade, if they expect to succeed in the profession. You see, the fact is, Clarice, I had no idea of hunting you up until a few months ago. I had a mission, out in this country, when I received orders to hunt you up, here, in regard to the alleged crookedness during your employ in the Post-office Department. So, really, I cannot help being here after you."

"Oh, Edward! why will you not be merciful on me? You can as well as not. I will give you money—ay, the whole wealth of my love if you will spare me and make me your wife."

Yreka Jim laughed oddly.

"I don't want your love. It's too antique. I wouldn't give five cents a ton for it. My duty is my duty, and when I get ready, back to Washington you go with me. Am sorry for you, but you have brought it all on yourself."

"I won't go! I won't go. I'll escape you."

The detective smiled.

"I rather fancy not!" he declared. "Try though you might, you could not get a mile from Tarpot without being intercepted."

She eyed him steadily a moment, a wicked glitter in her eye.

"Well, all I've got to say is that you are a fool!" she finally said—"not a common fool, but the biggest kind of a fool—a fool of fools!"

"So? I was not aware that I was so foolish as all that, I assure you. In what way am I a fool?"

"For thinking I would go back to Washington, to submit to imprisonment. Why, I'd poison or shoot myself, first!"

"Use poison, then. Unless you were to take daily practice at target-shooting, you would never be able to harm yourself with a pistol. In what other particular line do I resemble a fool?"

"You're a fool because you are so blind that you cannot see it would be immensely to your advantage to make terms with me!"

"Bosh! There you are again, off on that marriage scheme. I tell you, Clarice, I have no use for a woman one year older than myself, let alone one who is a veteran."

"I made no reference to marriage. I wouldn't have you if every hair in your head was hung with diamonds!" she flashed back. "How much money would you make by taking me back to Washington?"

"Five hundred dollars, in money, and thousands of dollars, in reputation!"

"Nonsense! Your reputation is sufficient. The pay is small. You have found me, here in Tarpot, but you have not found me a poor woman. As the relict of Ichabod Impree, I come into a magnificent fortune. You shall not even attempt to take me back to Washington. *I will buy you off!*"

"Oh! will you? Are you not rather premature in making so forcible a declaration? Would it not be advisable to first consult me?"

"No! Foolish though you may be, in many things, you cannot refuse a competency. Name your price to leave this place and let me alone, and you shall have it!"

"By no means, Clarice. I see you understand me no better than when you worked your wiles on me, a few years ago. In the first place, I don't believe you inherit any great amount of the Impree property. In the second place, the united schemes of yourself and Aaron Wygant shall all fall through. Thirdly, there is not enough gold in Tarpot to change my mind, once I have made a resolution."

He arose then, as if to depart.

"So you will not be merciful?" she interrogated, as he moved toward the door.

"Not a mercy!"

"Then, beware! He who spurns the appeal of a would-be repentant but serves to rekindle the fires of hatred in her veins. Beware, I say, Edward Hamill!"

"I will try to accommodate you, in this respect!" he retorted, and left the house as quietly as he had entered it.

CHAPTER XV.

A GHASTLY JOB.

THE town of Tarpot slumbered but little that night, for its pulse beat too wildly, consequent upon the succession of unusual events that had occurred within the last thirty hours.

At midnight the town was apparently as wide-awake and lively as earlier in the evening, the street being thronged and all the saloons and dance-houses in full blast.

Foghorn Fan stood upon the veranda of the Quartz House, smoking a cigarette. The expression upon her face was not one of the happiest.

As she leaned against the post which helped to support the roof of the veranda, her head turned occasionally, and she shot a sidelong glance through the open casement into the bar-room—or, more correctly, on beyond the bar, where, at the corner of the rifle-range, Idaho Ned stood in earnest conversation with Idyl Impree.

"He is deeply interested in her!" was the thought that brought to her an exquisite sense of pain. "She is as much interested in him, too, as he is in her! Oh! how I could wish it were not so!"

She was, evidently, jealous of the sport's attentions to the orphan.

A wild waif of the wild West was Foghorn Fan. Who she was, or what had caused her to lead the romantic existence she did—the unnatural, dangerous and reckless life—no one knew, or took pains to find out.

There were plenty of her characteristic type—fixtures, as it were, in each, or nearly each, mining-town. Each one, by some cause, had been self-banished, as it were, from the haunts of refined civilization; each one had a powerful cause for this banishment, and in nine cases out of ten, the secret of that cause never leaked out.

Foghorn Fan was one of this class. She was a beautiful girl; she was educated and accomplished, although she had fallen into the habit of using the rough vernacular of the border; she was perfectly virtuous, kind-hearted, brave, and yet susceptible.

In Tarpot, this latter fact had never occurred to her until the coming of Idaho Ned.

He was a man after her own cherished ideal.

She had admired him at first sight; then, as their acquaintance had developed, she was satisfied that she had a stronger feeling for him than mere admiration.

Did he?—would he reciprocate it?

That was what she was wondering, as she stood there, occasionally watching him, and the pleasant face of Idyl Impree.

"We are rivals," she mused, biting at her cigarette until she has exhausted it, and had no choice but to fling it away. "She likes him—so do I. She had no more right to him than I; she has no more attraction to win him than I. Why, then, does he prefer her society to mine? Is it because she dresses differently, or because he believes, by establishing her claim of inheritance against the Impree estate, that he will not only win her but a snug little fortune also? Pshaw! I don't believe he is that kind of a man. If I did, I'd not regard him in the light I do! One word from my lips in private to her would be enough to set her against him. Would that be right? No! no! All's fair in love or war, 'tis said but if I can not win him fairly, I'll not resort to any other means?"

It was a brave resolution, and had the sport known of it, no doubt it would have raised her much in his estimation.

He came out upon the veranda directly, and paused where she was standing.

"This seems to be rather an all-night town, eh?" he observed, pleasantly.

"More so than usual, to-night," she replied.

"The murder of Ichabod Impree seems to have caused a fit of sleeplessness to overtake the people, or else there is something brewing, which I am more than half inclined to think. What it is, however, I haven't been able to conceive!"

"Oh! I guess there's nothing particular on foot. If there was, we would see some acute manifestation of the fact."

"Well, maybe not, but I shouldn't be surprised if there was an outbreak, or a sensation of some sort, before morning."

"Directed at me?"

"Very possible."

"Oh! well; I guess I can take care of number one. If not, I trust I can look to you for assistance!"

"You bet, if I'm around!"

"Thank you. I should be proud of such a defender as you. To-morrow, I believe, things will come to a focus in regard to this Impree property business. I shall issue a call for settlement in behalf of Idyl Impree and the people. If there are any wills in existence they must be produced and proven then."

"A good idea. But what do you think of this new heiress business?"

"It's a humbug from the word go, as I hope to be able to prove."

Taking leave of her, Idaho Ned sauntered away down the street. When he reached the immediate vicinity of the mining office, he paused and darted keen glances around him.

There was, to all appearance, no one else in the neighborhood, and the crowd up at the Quartz House was not looking that way.

Stepping to the door of the office the sport produced a bunch of keys and soon had the door opened.

Without hesitation he entered and took the precaution to close and lock the door behind him.

Within, all was intensely dark and silent. The air was close and had a deathly odor that was not the pleasantest to inhale. To Idaho Ned, however, this fact evidently had no terrors. He groped about until he found the table with the lamp upon it. Striking a match, he soon had the lamp lit, it giving forth sufficient light to thoroughly illuminate the room.

The two bodies lay upon the floor, covered with a sheet, all except the headless necks, which protruded, grim and ghastly.

After a good look about the office, taking note of all its various appointments, Idaho Ned turned his attention to the bodies.

"Here's a clever little piece of detective work—to ferret out the murderer of these two men. I have already formed a suspicion, but it will be safest not to deal with that sort of evidence, entirely."

He removed the sheet from over the bodies, and proceeded to go through the pockets of the dead mine-owner, with a systematic deliberation that was suggestive, to say the least.

The contents of the pockets, which were a few unimportant letters, did not seem to give him the satisfaction he desired.

"Perhaps it was an unreasonable suspicion!" he mused; "yet, what caused it? So seldom does an idea forcibly strike me, that I must not pass this one without full investigation. Idyl gave me a solution, and I'll at least satisfy myself!"

He then set to work at removing the clothing from the mine-owner's body. It was not a particularly pleasant undertaking, for, courageous as the average man may be, he is not, as a rule, fond of handling the dead.

Idaho Ned seemed not to mind the job, how-

ever, for he stuck to it until he had the body stripped to the waist.

He then made a careful examination of the inanimate trunk, as if in search of some scar or blemish. But, there was none to be found—not even the faintest trace of one.

When he had satisfied himself on this point, the sport restored the garments, and covered up the bodies as he found them.

"There's something queer about this. Ichabod Impree *had* a scar on his breast, below the left lung, the result of a bullet-wound he received in the war. Even Idyl agreed that this was probable, as she had heard him speak of annoyance from the old wound, just before a storm. This trunk has no evidence of ever having sustained a wound, and therefore, in accordance with my original suspicion, is *not* the body of Ichabod Impree!"

Not a man in Tarpot would have given the least credit to the suspicion, except him with whom it had originated. Few keener detectives than Idaho Ned were to be found in the West, and experience had served to make him what he was.

He well knew that Clarice Impree, *nee* Celeste, a character of New York and Washington criminal society, was a bold, dangerous, and designing woman.

Aaron Wygant, too, was not altogether unknown to him, and he made no hesitation in classing him with the widow, as a suspicious and dangerous character.

Taking into consideration Wygant's arrival in Tarpot, the night of the murder, and putting this and that together, he had arrived at the conclusion that there was a large opportunity for united and ingenious scheming, and large chances that, if Ichabod Impree *was* dead, they—Wygant and Clarice—were concerned in the crime; or else Ichabod Impree was not dead at all.

The more he thought over the matter, the firmer became his conviction that Impree might not be dead; hence the visit to the office.

"No! Ichabod Impree, you're *not* dead, and I'm glad of it!" the sport muttered, as he prepared to leave the office. "Wherever you are I will find you, and wrest the truth from your lips, or tear the tongue from your mouth. It is of double interest for me to find you, now that two human snakes are scheming against the fair girl, Idyl!"

Blowing out the lamp he left the office.

As he was trying to find the key-hole, so as to relock the door, a voice hissed close to his ear:

"*You are wanted!*"

At the same time a heavy blanket was thrown over his head, and an overpowering weight, as of many hands, bore him to the ground!

CHAPTER XVI.

THE LOTTERY OF LIFE.

FEW men in Tarpot possessed more strength, or a better knowledge how to use it, than Idaho Ned; but he found himself unable to resist the power that bore him downward and pinioned him to the ground, struggle as he might.

In less time than it takes to tell it, he was bound hand and foot, and the blanket over his head prevented his making any cries heard,

had he attempted to raise an alarm, which he did not.

He was then raised and borne away.

As near as he was able to judge, he was carried between half a dozen men.

Where they were taking him, of course he could form no idea. It was full half an hour ere the captors halted, and he was deposited upon a rocky floor, which caused him to draw the conclusion that he was in some cavern or subterranean passage.

He was left lying for some minutes ere he was raised and placed in what he judged was a rude arm-chair.

The blanket was then removed from his head and he was given the use of his eyes.

The scene which met his gaze was not exactly calculated to be soothing to a person's nerves. He was seated in, or rather bound in, a large, rudely-constructed arm-chair, in the center of a large apartment, hewn out of soft rock or shale.

Around the sides of this room were a number of doors leading into other apartments. Also, there were rude settees, on which were seated eleven men, clad in black gowns, with hoods over their heads, and masks concealing their features.

Near the sport was a long table, and at this was seated a twelfth man.

Ned needed but one glance to convince him that he was in the presence of the Black List, of which Foghorn Fan had told him.

The man at the table was attired the same as the others, except that the mask which concealed his features was red instead of black.

Upon the table was a wheel, such as is used by the wheel-of-fortune men, containing numbers between the snap-pins. This wheel, however, was smaller than usual, and the pins were so arranged that there were but twelve spaces upon the wheel.

Scattered upon the table, before the hooded individual, who was evidently the leader of the gang, were cards, numbered from one to twelve.

Idaho Ned saw this much, before the leader rapped upon the table, which signal caused the other men to arise and gather around the board.

The chief also arose, and directed his gaze at the sport.

"Prisoner in the chair, are you aware of the character of the august body in whose presence you are?"

"I reckon I am!" Idaho replied, coolly. "You're a bloody gang of cut-throats, and dub yourselves the Black List."

"We *are* the Black List. You are Idaho Ned?"

"I am."

"You are likewise Yreka Jim, the Gold-Gatherer?"

"Correct, again!"

"And also, a detective."

"How do you know?"

"That matters not. It is known to us that you are a detective. Furthermore, I can tell you what brought you to Tarpot."

"Sure?"

The sport was as calm and collected as a preacher before prayers.

"We are sure. About a year ago, a pard of yours named Yreka Jim, came down into this country to hunt down an outlaw named Murdock, who had murdered his family. Did he not return within six months' time, it was an agreement between you that you should follow him, and hunt him up; if he was dead, to avenge his death!"

"Well?"

"Well, Murdock belonged to the Black List, at the time your pard struck this vicinity, and, knowing his mission, it was one of the first acts of the order to work him, and to arrange things that he should secure a respectable planting!"

The news caused a rift of pallor to flit across the sport's face; then, a compressure of the lips denoted that a spirit of vengeance had entered his heart.

The chief went on:

"Yes, seeing that he failed to meet his order obligations, we had to plant him, and I suppose we shall have to serve you likewise. But that is unimportant now. This town of Tarpot was originally started by twelve men, who were utterly dead-broke and desperate, myself being one. By mutual consent we formed a secret order—or association—the sole object of which was money; in other words, all of us being desperate and reckless spirits, we agreed upon a Lottery of Life among ourselves by a fearful oath. It was to exist for a specified time only, and at the expiration of that time was to disband. To-night is the time set for the expiration of the order, as originally agreed.

"In arranging this lottery, it was designed to have one weekly drawing, until the last drawing of the order. At each drawing one member must draw his death-warrant. On yonder wheel are twelve numbers. When the wheel is whirled, the indicating finger must surely stop upon some distinct number from one to twelve, inclusive. Before the wheel is whirled, these twelve cards, bearing numbers from one to twelve, are shuffled and dealt to the members. The wheel is then whirled, and after a number of revolutions the indicating finger points to some number. Whoever has a card bearing the corresponding number is, as we say, drawn for death. Do you understand?"

"Go ahead!"

"Well, upon being thus drawn, the elected man has a chance. If he is lucky enough to possess, or can obtain one thousand dollars, he pays it into the treasury, and the drawing is off for that night. When the number falls to some one who has not that sum of money, he is forced to take his own life in the presence of the order—after which he is respectably planted in our little cemetery, whose few graves attest the fact that only five of our order have been so impecunious as to be unable to pay the ransom, or so poor in friends as to find no one to pay it for him; and as we have had the lottery weekly for the stipulated time, just one hundred weeks, you can see that our treasury is now heavy with gold and greenbacks; for when one had to drop out we always had another quite ready to take his place, in order to stand his chance for the last grab or division of the whole accumulated sum.

"On the seventh hundredth day, as I have said, the order was to cease to exist, after the

following plan: The twelve members then living were to meet for the last time, in this council-chamber. One outsider was to be drafted, who should be decided by vote. You were the man chosen!"

Idaho Ned nodded assent, not knowing what else to do. It was all a queer affair to his understanding.

Did this society propose to make him one of their victims as a kind of final sacrifice or blood-offering? What did they want of him, anyhow?

The chief went on:

"The last drawing of the lottery takes place to-night, and in the same manner as is customary, except that it is to be continuous, and when one man drops out, unable to pay the fine, no new one is substituted. Such as drop out have the choice of shooting themselves or being shot by you!"

"By me?"

"Exactly. You will be required to turn the wheel and act as executioner."

"I reckon you'll have to excuse me from any part in this villainous transaction!" Idaho declared. "I'll have nothing to do with it!"

"On the contrary, you will. It's your only choice. Refuse, and you will be shot where you sit. I will give you just five minutes to choose!"

He drew a watch from a pocket in his gown, and laid it upon the table in front of him. At the same instant, the other members of the Black List each drew a revolver and leveled it at the sport.

Idaho Ned had been in many dangerous positions, but none where life or death depended so surely as now.

He had but the one choice—to accept. To refuse meant death.

"I reckon I'll have to come to time," Ned then asserted. "You have the advantage too immensely for me to do otherwise."

The chief, making no answer, removed Idaho's weapons from his person, and pushed the table containing the wheel toward him. Ned's right hand was then loosened, so that he could use it to whirl the wheel.

"Gentlemen," the chief said, "we will now proceed to business. Are you all ready?"

There was a murmur of assent—a sullen rumble of voices that was horrible in its suggestiveness.

"Would you allow me to make a suggestion?" the prisoner suddenly asked, as an idea flashed through his brain.

"Speak!" the chief ordered.

"What I have to suggest, then, is this: It is apparent that you men are not personal enemies!"

"We are not!"

"Then, why this needless butchery! Let the first drawing take place as originally designed. Then, removing the number drawn, insert a blank card. Eleven of you run a chance of drawing this blank. He who draws the blank leaves the place without ransom, but never to return. Then remove his card, add another blank and the rest of you have an additional chance of escaping the forfeit of life or money. When the real number is drawn, that man must pony up his thousand before he leaves, or blow

out his own brains, as that poor wretch lying there had to do," and he pointed to the silent form which the men had drawn to the side of the room. "The last man, of course, takes the pot."

This proposition was greeted with approval by the men, and after a few moments of reflection the chief signified his assent, and dealt the first round of twelve cards.

Each man looked at his card, to ascertain its number, and then laid it down, face downward.

"Whirl the wheel!" the chief ordered.

Noting that each of these desperate wretches clutched a cocked revolver, little wonder that Idaho Ned shuddered, as he laid hold of the fatal wheel, and sent it spinning around and around on its axle.

Thirteen pairs of eyes were fastened upon it, as its revolutions became slower and the sound of the snap-pin became louder.

Slower—slower; then, the wheel became motionless, and the finger pointed to the hour of ten.

Without a comment, but with a mechanical sort of unison, the twelve men turned and glared at each other.

There was a hush, of an instant's duration; then, one of the men placed the muzzle of his pistol to his temple and fired. He had no money for his ransom; so fulfilled the bond without hesitancy.

He fell, with scarcely a groan.

"The cards!" the chief said hoarsely.

The "ten" card was discarded, and the other eleven, with a blank, were shuffled.

So the lottery proceeded. When by chance any number was drawn, the man holding that simply put up the \$1,000 ransom and withdrew, a new blank being inserted in the pack. Singularly enough the number drawn did not once fall to the chief, so that when the eleventh one left the den the chief remained, master of the situation—the owner of all that horribly gathered board!

CHAPTER XVII.

FATHER AND SON.

AS number eleven hastened from the chamber, the chief turned and faced Idaho Ned, who sat at the wheel—not defenseless, however. A cocked revolver was in his hand, which he had secured from the table, and its aim was directed at the chief.

"Stand!" Idaho cried, his face firm in expression, and his eyes glittering. "It is our turn to come to settlement, now. Put down that pistol or I'll blow your brains out, without an instant's hesitation!"

There could be no mistaking this earnestness, and the chief evidently knew it, for with a muttered execration, he threw his weapon on the table.

"That's right!" Idaho declared. "When Yreka Jim commands—even though he be the second of that illustrious name—it is always advisable to be sensible. Take a chair, now, and be careful not to make any suspicious moves with your hands, lest I misconstrue your meaning and plug you plum through the noddle."

The chief obeyed.

It was with him as it had been with the sport, not long before—he had no choice but to obey. When he was seated, Idaho took the opportunity to release his other hand, and then tossed a cigar upon the table, and lit one himself.

"Smoke, and take things easy, while we converse!" he ordered. "There's nothing I like so well as a good smoke. It puts my nerves in tip-top order. Now, my friend, since we are all alone, suppose you elucidate as to the title you were known by among these men?"

"I was called Red Rowell!" was the answer, as the chief disdained to accept the cigar.

"Red Rowell, eh? Quite a fantastic name—real romantic, too. I suppose you adopted the name with a future view of adding it to the list of noted bandits and cut-throats?"

"It doesn't matter to you why I adopted it."

"Oh! but it does! I may some day turn historian, and it would be losing, mayhap, one of the most interesting chapters in my book not to work you up. Let me see: How would a title in red ink and top-boots go, something like this: 'Red Rowell, or Ichabod Impree's Lost Head!' Don't you think that would be quite striking, especially the headless suggestion?"

A low curse escaped the villain's lips.

"Enough of this nonsense!" he cried. "If you propose to rob me, as robber you are, go ahead and be done with it!"

"Oh! but I don't! I've been exercising my elbow by turning this wheel, and my charges for services will cover all your blood-money. By the way, Ichabod, that was mean of you to give the folks of Tarpot such a shock by representing yourself defunct. Why, I had the honor of calling upon your widow, and she was so overwhelmed with grief that I was afraid she wouldn't survive the shock—she loved you so—you know!"

"This sort of talk is useless. What do you propose to do?"

"Kill you, directly, maybe. But, take off the mask, Ichabod—take it off, I say!" and the sport's revolver looked persuasively at the chief over the table. "I know you, you see, and there's no use of your making a *mardi-gras* carnival out of yourself!"

Another curse escaped the chief, and the mask was torn away with a jerk.

It was indeed the face of Ichabod Impree, disclosed to view.

"Ten thousand devils seize you!" he gritted. "How did you discover my identity?"

"By intuition, and the knowledge that your moral precepts had been twisted in sad shape years ago. What was your idea of playing the ruse on the people of Tarpot, Ichabod?"

The mine-owner glared savagely at the sport, then answered:

"Well, my object was two-fold: First, because I knew that the time was at hand for closing the accounts of the Black List. Assuming that I might be among the doomed, I desired that my name should not be disgraced, and so killed myself beforehand. Had it come to me to shoot myself to-night, I should have so disfigured my face as to have made it unrecognizable."

"The other reason?"

"I suspected my wife of being even more of

an adept in villainy than myself. She exercised a power over me that I had not the ability to counteract. In order that she might not try to force me to do something I did not want to, namely—to disinherit my child!"

"Ah! then, you did *not* disinherit her?"

"No. I made a will, which is now in the hands of Lawyer Dodge, the night I placed the dead bodies in the office."

"And left all to Idyl?"

"No. Two-thirds to her—one-third to *you*!"

"Ah! you did?"

And a dangerous glitter entered the sport's eyes.

"I did. Perhaps you thought I was not aware of the fact that you were my own son, by my first marriage, but I knew you and knew you were hunting me down!"

"And what for, I suppose?"

"Yes. It was to force me to take back the cruel words I spoke to your mother when I deserted her. Oh! I know it all. God knows I have been a bad man, but I cannot help it now!"

"Ichabod Hamill, you have been a curse upon the face of the earth!"

"I know it, I know it, boy. You need not tell me of it!"

"Ha! you hate to hear of your misdeeds, do you? I don't wonder! Do you not often see hell yawning before you in your dreams? Gods! but I have a mind to bore a hole through your rotten heart, as you sit there! I am my mother's boy—the offspring of that angelic woman whom you so basely deserted, declaring that your marriage with her was but a sham! The foulest, blackest lie was that, ever uttered by the lips of man!"

"True! true! I acknowledge it all. She was my wife, and you are my son. She was good, true and pure, but the devil had me, and I deserted her. May God forgive me for that, if He never forgives me for aught else!"

"I was told the story of your wretchedness, and my mother's death, when I grew old enough to understand, and I registered an oath to hunt you down, and force you to own the truth."

"You will not have to force me. I own it willingly."

"It is well you do. Villain though you are, you are yet my father, and I want not your blood on my hands. But, what of this girl—this Idyl Impree?"

"She is my daughter. I married again, after your mother's death, and Idyl is the child of that marriage."

"How did your second wife die?"

"Of consumption."

Idaho was silent a few minutes; then he related what Aaron Wygant had stated and claimed.

"It is utterly false!" the mine-owner declared.

"It is but a scheme of his and Clarice's to work in his own daughter. I acknowledge that I know Clarice told Idyl she was not my child, and I made no effort to correct the matter. The reason was because I feared to do it. I learned, not long after my marriage, that Clarice and Aaron Wygant had been lovers. I also learned that the woman was treacherous and dangerous, and when she threatened to ruin my home and my child, if I did not publicly disown

her, I both feared for my life and for Idyl's safety; so chose the lesser of two evils, knowing that I could so provide for Idyl that she would be all right after my demise, and sustained by the people, who all love her, that she would do well and be rid of the she-devil her step-mother."

"Who were the men who escaped from this room to-night?"

"All except two were common miners. The two were Jim Cephas, my mine-boss, and old Ben Tarpot!"

"Did they know you were Ichabod Impree?"

"Cephas did not. Tarpot, I know, did, as he was one of the first on the Black List. His tongue never wags any one detriment, however!"

Idaho Ned finished his cigar before he spoke again.

"This blood-money of your infernal order—what shape is it in?"

"In greebacks of large denominations. I have thus changed it, from gold, from time to time, as it is easier to handle. Only what has recently been in is in gold or nuggets."

"Go get it!"

The erring father obeyed promptly, and soon laid three goodly sized packages of notes and one heavy bag of gold before the sport.

"There is the money. Do as you please with it. Only give me money enough to pay my way to some place where I can begin life anew, under a new name, and I will ask no more."

"This money I would not touch a dollar of!" Idaho declared. "It is poisoned—cursed by the lives that have accumulated it. Idyl shall not have it. You shall not have it. See! this shall be its fate!"

He would have thrust the packages into the flames of the lamp, but Impree sprung forward.

"Don't! don't!" he cried. "Give it to the town of Tarpot, as some expiation for the curse I have put upon it."

"Right! Tarpot shall have it, to build a jail to hold Yreka Jim, the Gold-Gatherer, whenever he is apprehended!" the sport said, dryly.

CHAPTER XVIII.

WYGANT'S PLOT.

EARLY the following morning Lawyer Dionysius Dodge sat in his sparsely-furnished office in deep reflection.

The subject of his thoughts was not exactly of a business character, as the term applied to his clients, but of a business character as applied to himself.

The fact was Dodge was in a bad strait. The meager stipend he acquired from his business would not make a man feel rich, and such as it was, the disciple of Blackstone was wont to risk it at the faro-table over at the Quartz House.

As luck was a luxury unknown to him, he always came out broke, and his inner man often became the victim of his folly—he had nothing to eat.

Such was the state of affairs this morning, when his stomach felt as if it had never known the meaning or usefulness of provender, and his pocket-book was as flat as though the Light of Asia had stepped upon it.

As the student in technicalities was not a priv-

ileged character in Tarpot business circles, so far as credit was concerned, things looked decidedly blue, and this was the fact that he was dolefully turning over in his mind, when there came a rap on the door, and Aaron Wygant entered, without waiting for an invitation.

"Good-morning!" he said briskly. "You're Dodge, the lawyer, I suppose?"

"At your service!" Dionysius replied, dipping his pen into ink and hitching nearer his desk in anticipation of a job.

"What can I do for you, this lovely morning?"

"Much, perhaps. I presume you do not recognize me?"

"No, sir—can't say I ever saw you before."

"But you have. I had the honor of a nocturnal interview with you."

"Aw—you're the man with the revolver?"

"I am. I called to see you in reference to settling up the Impree estate."

"Ah! yes, yes—I see! I see!"

"Make no mistake but you see right. If you are able to take a hint we may be able to make a bargain."

"A bargain—ah! yes, yes! Proceed, sir."

"Well, in the first place, you made a will for Ichabod Impree?"

"I did, sir."

"And the terms of that will—"

"Left everything to his daughter, Idyl. Ah! yes—all to his daughter, except one third, which goes to Yreka Jim."

"The devil you say!" Wygant cried hoarsely.

"Why, confound you, sir, you told me that two-thirds were left to the widow, and that the girl was disinherited."

"I told you this, sir?"

"Most emphatically you did."

"Then most emphatically I prevaricated, a habit I have sometimes when up late at night."

"Curse your infernal hide, you're lying to me now! Let me see the will you drew up for Impree!"

"Not for the world, sir. That would be a breach of legal faith. This gentleman for whom I drew the will is dead, and I shall hold the will and attend to the matters as its custodian."

"Will you? All right; you may. But you'll need a coffin if you don't come to my terms!"

"Your terms?"

"Yes, my terms. You've got to add to that will. Additions, you know, are not forgery."

"Ah! no. Sure enough. What are the additions?"

"These: Following the clause devising two-thirds of the property to Idyl Impree, write this: 'The girl known in Tarpot as Idyl Impree is not Idyl Impree, nor my legatee. The real Idyl Impree will be produced by her temporary guardian, Aaron Wygant, and it is to her my bequest is made.' At or near the close of the will add: 'And I do hereby furthermore appoint Aaron Wygant sole executor by this codicil, with full power to sell, convert into cash and distribute to my heirs the value of my property, he retaining a reasonable fee as compensation for his services.' These little additions, you see, can easily be made, and it will be a ten-strike for you."

"But this is wrong, sir."

"What's that your business? so that you get paid well, you need not care."

"How much will you give?" he asked, as his bread-basket gave a twinge, and threatened to collapse altogether.

"I'll give you a thousand dollars; half down, now, and the other half when you read the will in public, from the steps of the Quartz House at noon to-day."

"It's a bargain. Give us your money!"

"Remember! no trickery now! It will be your death-warrant, if you attempt anything of the kind."

"I'll fix it all solid. All I want is the cash, so that I can get a good square meal—then I'll go for your job like a toad for June-bugs."

Believing he could rely upon the impecunious shyster, Wygant paid over the money and took his departure.

"All is well now," he muttered. "Madeline shall succeed to the property, and once I get control of it, I'll take care not to lose it. The charming widow—she can go to Halifax then!"

CHAPTER XIX.

CONCLUSION.

It was toward noon when Idaho Ned made his appearance at the Quartz House, for the first time that day.

He was looking in usual good spirits, and bore no traces of the strange adventure of the previous night.

He found Foghorn Fan upon the veranda, where she was engaged in reading a notice, which had been recently posted, and that ran as follows;

"NOTICE.

"Notice is hereby given, that I, Dionysius Dodge, attorney and counselor-at-law, of the town of Tarpot, will, at twelve o'clock, noon, to-day, read, publicly and aloud, from the steps of the Quartz House, to the people of Tarpot, the last will and testament of Ichabod Impree, deceased, dictated by him and executed by me, a few hours previous to his death."

"What do you think of it?" Fan demanded, turning at the sport's approach.

"Nothing in particular," Idaho replied, after glancing it over. "It is the original will, no doubt, unless the shyster has been bribed to change it. At any rate, it is now a certainty that Idyl will have her rights."

"Ah! then, you have learned something?"

"Yes. My trail ends in Tarpot. I have found that father whom I privately told you I sought!"

"And got the truth from him? Oh, I am glad for your sake—I suppose, now, it will not be long ere wedding bells will ring in Tarpot?"

"Ha! ha! Hadn't you better wait until I have secured my bird, first?"

"Oh! you need not play innocent. I have got eyes!"

"Deucedly pretty ones, too, but they are cross-eyes this time—don't see things as they are. You think I have been captured by Miss Idyl. Considering that she is my own half-sister—"

"She your half-sister?" the surprised girl interrupted.

"My own half-sister; nothing more or less."

"Then you are Ichabod Impree's son?"

"Yes, unhappily, yes!"

"Then he is not dead?" in new surprise.

"Not dead, though he ought to be. But, not a word of this. Ichabod Impree Hamill will never trouble Tarpot again, as a citizen. After seeing that my sister is established in her rights, I, too, shall hie myself to other fields."

"I am sorry to hear that."

"Are you? Why?"

She colored, as she felt that he was gazing intently into her face.

"Oh! I don't know, I am sure," she replied, endeavoring to speak lightly and buoyantly, but making a dismal failure of the matter. "I have been much pleased to know you, even though our acquaintance has been of short duration."

"I am glad to have made a good impression. I am not a stupendous success, as a lady's man, and generally make so many blunders that the weaker sex have a holy horror of me."

"Pshaw! I don't see anything of the sort about you, I almost— Do you think Idyl will have any trouble in getting her property?"

"No trouble whatever. But answer me; why are you sorry I am going away?"

She flushed, grew confused, and turning, hurried away, preferring anything rather than remain under the scrutiny of Idaho's laughing eyes.

A big crowd was in the street, facing the hotel when the hour of noon arrived. Every one was eager to hear the terms of Ichabod Impree's will.

Upon the veranda, when the lawyer made his appearance, were Mrs. Impree, Idaho Ned, Foghorn Fan, Aaron Wygant, his son, Ned, and a tall, fragile-looking girl, who leaned upon Ned's arm, pale as death.

Idyl Impree stood in the doorway.

Dodge was punctual, and after a request to the crowd to preserve silence, he read the opening of the will, until he came to the bequests.

"To my daughter, Idyl Impree, who has always resided with me, in Tarpot—"

"Stop! stop!" Wygant almost screamed, springing forward.

"It is you who had better slow up!" Idaho warned, jerking him back. "The jig's up, Wygant! Your effort to buy Dodge didn't work. Your attempt to cheat Idyl Impree out of her birthright is unsuccessful. I, sir, am her own half-brother. Your own son, villain, has gone back on you. He declares the young lady there to be this woman's own child."

Wygant turned and glanced at his son like an enraged demon.

"It is true, father," Ned said, calmly. "Madeline knows all, and we both agreed not to become a party to the fraud. Madeline may have no home, but she shall have a loving husband."

That was enough. The frowning miners now seeing the man Wygant and the woman Clarice in their true colors, uttered a growl and then moved forward in a body.

"Seize the cuss!" "String 'em both up!" were the cries.

"Not yet, boys," cried Idaho. "Idyl wants no rights if they are to be won by any more bloodshed. Give them each a horse and start

them. You can see 'em out of town as an escort of honor; then come back here and drink to the good health and long life of Idyl, the Queen of Tarpot!"

"Hurrah!" was the yelling response, and almost before the man and woman were aware the mob had seized them. Two miserable mules were brought forward and the victims mounted. Then they were started down the stage-road at a full gallop—the crowd yelling and howling at their heels!

Tarpot had never had such a circus. Almost everybody ran in the ridiculous cavalcade; even Foghorn Fan and Dodge had to follow after to see the fun, while Idyl, as if to shut out the sight of it all, retired to the deserted rifle-gallery, to be seen no more that day.

When the crowd returned from having escorted Wygant and the widow beyond the precincts of Tarpot, Idaho Ned was nowhere to be seen. Search failed to find him, and the people were greatly amazed thereat.

But he had left behind such a good record that all who drew up to the bar and drank to Idyl's health and happiness, voted him "the Boss Boy o' the Hills," as Cephas characterized him, and at the mine manager's treat the crowd also drank to Idaho Ned's memory.

Dodge took charge of matters for Idyl, and she was acknowledged the sole possessor of her father's possessions, while Cephas, for his devotion to her interest, was made the superintendent of the mine and works.

Ned Wygant wedded Madeline, and was installed in the office as cashier and secretary, at a good salary—Madeline and Idyl becoming good friends.

A few days after this series of singular incidents, the citizens assembled and elected a "mayor," to run the town in better shape, and on his first day in office, he was electrified to receive the blood-money of the Black List by a mysterious messenger, together with the following:

"DEAR SIR:—The inclosed is for the purpose of building a jail in your town sufficiently strong to hold me should you ever get your claws on me.

"Yours, *pro bono publico*,

"YREKA JIM, alias IDAHO NED,
"The Gold-Gatherer."

The same messenger also placed in Foghorn Fan's hands this communication:

"DEAR LADY:—I did not bid you adieu when I left Tarpot so suddenly, because, although I have no doubt of your love for me, I only too well realize that our paths through life should lie widely apart; it will be better for you if we never meet again. But it rests with yourself to choose. IDAHO."

As the girl disappeared from Tarpot that very afternoon, it may be safe to conclude that she followed the messenger to the handsome Yreka Jim, the Gold-Gatherer, or Idaho Ned, the Detective, both of which names and callings he apparently still chose to retain and pursue.

THE END.

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